THE RACE FOR WASHINGTON, DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO “CATCH-UP”:
ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS A VIABLE MEANS?

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Liberal Studies

By

Katie Emelia Michaels, B.S.B.A.

Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.
December 1, 2008
THE RACE FOR WASHINGTON, DC PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO “CATCH-UP”: ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS A VIABLE MEANS?

Katie Emelia Michaels, B.S.B.A

Mentor: Nikki Krasus Castle, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The District of Columbia, which currently holds the second strongest of the nation’s 41 charter laws, has over 56 public charter schools serving the needs of elementary, middle, and high school students. Dissatisfaction on a number of levels with the quality of a DC public education brought about this changing public school environment. In the past decade, there has been an increasing demand for charters by families, teachers, and students.

As a point of reference to gauge the success of charter schools, schools from states with the strongest charter laws are evaluated. Much is to be inferred from an analysis of the high achieving schools in these regions. For the purpose of this thesis, the District of Columbia is the focus.

This study offers a summary of the common values that constitute successful schools, incorporating policy recommendations for improved Washington, DC public schools. Test scores are just one of many factors that define a successful school. Teacher quality, curriculum, teaching methodology, school leadership, professional
environment, and discipline systems\(^1\) are just a few of the many other attributes that impact a school’s ability to educate its students. Three case studies of high performing Washington, DC charter middle schools reveal the most prominent trends amongst the model charters. These are determined to be goal based academic instruction, a longer school day, and character education programs.

Successful charter schools provide a valuable education to students, and are expanding to the point where they may eventually outnumber public schools. There is a great need to facilitate collaboration among charter schools and between charter schools and traditional public schools to initiate these attributes and values. Across the city, improved school models based on these recommendations may ensure higher graduation rates and college attendance for DC public school students, leading to more successful futures. The growth of successful charter schools should compel public schools to improve in order to sustain the quality of our nation’s public education system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Nikki Castle, for her unwavering support and vast knowledge of charter school reform. Her guidance helped me to create an accurate perspective of this movement and its profound impact on our nation’s public education system. This thesis is dedicated to my father, Edward Albert Michaels, C’77.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLES AND FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. HISTORY OF U.S. CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION REFORM</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. WASHINGTON, DC CHARTER SCHOOLS: HISTORICAL, LEGAL, AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THREE CASE STUDIES</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. VALUES OF SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOLS</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5. CHARTER SCHOOLS: AN IMPRETUS FOR CHANGE?</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLES

Table 1. Charter School Law Rankings by State 16
Table 2. Criteria For a Strong Charter Law 35
Table 3. History of DC Charter School Approvals 38

Table 4. Friendship-Woodridge Public Charter DC-CAS Performance by Grade 55
Table 5. KIPP: KEY Academy DC-CAS Performance by Grade 68
Table 6. The SEED Public Charter School DC-CAS Performance by Grade 81

# FIGURES

Figure 1. Public Charter School and Campus Proliferation 32
Figure 2. DC Public Charter Schools Annualized Growth 33
INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, in both large cities like New York and small towns like Moorehead, Mississippi, a common problem plagues the nation’s youth. Children of low income and minority backgrounds have limited access to a decent education. An enormous disparity exists between the public school experience in an upper middle class neighborhood and in a poor slum. “By the end of fourth grade, African-American and Latino students, and poor students of all races, are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly white peers in reading and math.” Students from low-income school districts are less likely to graduate from high school, and unlikely to attend college. In a nation built on the cornerstone of democracy, these children lack options to improve their existence.

Education has long been revered as a means to prosperity. Kindergarten through twelfth grade education provides a basic academic foundation, enabling students to lead a successful life. For children of low-income or minority families, a quality education may be the only way to overcome poverty, leading to social and financial independence. All children have the ability to succeed, but unfortunately, some lack the educational opportunities that they deserve.

---

1 Arthur Levine, Why should I worry about schools my children won’t attend? (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, May 2005).
Underserved schools have been the topic of political debate for several decades. The launch of “A Nation at Risk,”\(^2\) was the first official document to shed light on the disparities in low-income education, and numerous publications and debate followed. Since then, awareness of the lack of quality education has prompted a number of reforms to engage students underserved by the current system. One specific response is the emergence of charter schools at the state level.

While many states struggle to meet the needs of underserved schools and students, our nation’s capital finds this particularly challenging. Home to political democracy and many of our greatest treasures, Washington, DC also houses some of America’s worst public schools. The city of over half a million residents “has a higher per-capita income than any state and a higher poverty rate than all but five states.”\(^3\)

Due to the state of DC’s education, charter schools as a means of education reform have sprung up throughout the city. Following its 1996 passage, Washington DC’s charter law is the second strongest in the country, with the highest percentage of student enrollment in charters. The resulting movement is revitalizing education options for the District’s most underprivileged citizens.


With the future of our capital’s public school children in question, this thesis focuses on the successful DC charter schools and the model that they may be for traditional public schools. To place Washington, DC charters into the broader context, Chapter 1 provides an overview of the national charter school movement. Charter schools are one of the fastest growing and innovative education reforms in the country. This chapter describes the history of the movement, beginning with its early roots in Minnesota. Within this context, the role of lawmakers and government agencies is explained, emphasizing the administration of charters and the current state of affairs.

Chapter 2 delves into the specifics of DC’s charter school movement, which has grown from two schools serving 120 students in 1996 to 56 schools serving 22,000 students in 2008. This chapter details the historical and legal background of DC Charter schools, focusing on the DC charter law, currently the second strongest in the country. The administrative components of authorizers, school regulation, and accountability are addressed, emphasizing the current state of DC charter schools.

With an understanding of the dynamic Washington, DC charter school movement, Chapter 3 offers case studies of three outstanding DC charter middle schools: Friendship Woodridge, KIPP DC: KEY Academy, and the SEED School. All these serve low-income African American populations while yielding high achievement. Each includes middle school grades that achieved No Child Left Behind (NCLB) proficiency over the past four years. These successful schools
provide examples for study of common trends and values aligned with student achievement.

The lens then narrows to engage in examining the common attributes and consistent values found across the board in each of the case study schools. Values are aligned to student achievement, with the goal of determining the correct balance of values for a successful school. Parental involvement, strong teachers, commitment to learning, consistent discipline, accountability, and community are expected to play a role in this balanced school environment.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the possible infusion of successful charter school values into a public school model. Does the bureaucracy of District of Columbia (DCPS) even allow for such change? Value tensions among the three model charter schools raise three two key questions. Are there additional tensions between model charter schools and traditional public schools, given their differing governance and organizational designs? Do the core values of fairness, equal opportunity, and achievement transcend both charter and public schools? This analysis identifies the most promising values for student achievement. A critical question that evolves from this analysis is the extent to which charter schools be involved with public schools that adopt these values and employ new models.

This study concludes with a summary of the values that constitute successful schools, incorporating policy recommendations for improved Washington, DC public schools. Successful schools are defined by many attributes outside of quantitative
student performance data. There is a great need to facilitate collaboration among charter schools and between charter schools and traditional public schools to initiate these attributes and values. Across the city, improved school models based on these recommendations may ensure higher graduation rates and college attendance for DC public school students, leading to more successful futures.
CHAPTER 1

HISTORY OF U.S. CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION REFORM

Charter schools are one of the fastest growing and most innovative education reforms in the country. “Charters are public schools that are created through a charter with a public entity such as a state or a school district.”¹ Frequently, they are the vision of communities who are unsatisfied with the existing public schools options. “These charters, or contracts, are granted from a public agency to a group of parents, teachers, school administrators, nonprofit agencies, organizations, or businesses that wish to create an alternative to existing public schools in order to provide choice within the public school system.”² Charter schools have no admission requirements; they cannot legally discriminate or exclude certain students. Often misinterpreted is the fact that charter schools are publicly accountable; thus, they are public, not private, schools. They receive less than or the same per pupil funding as traditional public schools, depending on their state laws.


Charter schools differ from traditional public schools based on three basic principles. First, charter schools give families a choice. Parents have the opportunity to select a school for their child that will best suit their needs. Teachers and administrators choose charters that allow autonomy and authority in curriculum and operational decisions. Chartering authorities may opt to approve or deny a charter based its ability to serve the needs of a community.

Second, charter schools are accountable to state standards in addition to the terms of their contract. Contracts are typically approved by the state for periods of three to five years. If a school is underperforming at the end of the contract period, its charter is revoked and the school will be closed. “A traditional public school that is failing may continue to operate for years without providing an adequate education to students; a charter school that doesn’t deliver on its educational promises has to shut its doors.” By meeting state and contract standards, charters will be rewarded with a renewed contract.

Third, and arguably most important, charter schools are granted freedom from the typical bureaucracy and red tape to which traditional public schools must comply. While charters must adhere to major laws such as disability accommodations, school

---


leaders can focus on creating innovative curricula and cultivating high achieving students.

The charter school movement, rooted in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992, now serves over 4,100 charter schools serve over 1.2 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia.\(^5\) By this growth, it is evident that parents and teachers alike are selecting these schools of choice to further the education of our children. DC charters are modeled after the successes of previous charters across the country; therefore, the foundations of the movement and its impact on U.S. education need to be understood from a historical and legal perspective.

**History of Charter School Reform**

The charter school movement has strong ties to early education reforms, including school choice, magnets schools, site-based management, privatization, and parental empowerment. It spawned from two important historical moments: first, Ray Budde’s mention of the word “charter” in an education reform paper, and second, the passage of the first charter law in Minnesota.

During the late 1960’s and the early 1970’s, parents and educators across the nation began creating new school options that would appeal to a variety of students. These *choice schools* utilized internships, site-based management, and parental empowerment.

---

involvement to fuel their innovative models. Designed by communities, these schools opened their doors to an array of students without admission requirements.

In the mid-1970’s, a second type of school known as **magnet schools** emerged, intended to encourage racial integration. Specialized curricula necessitated admissions tests and requirements, encouraging the enrollment of students from varying school districts. “Magnet schools are under no requirement to demonstrate that the skills and knowledge of their students have improved whereas charter schools are held publicly accountable for student achievement and student improvement through their contractual relationship with the public.”

By the early 1980s, a third option known as **alternative schools** opened their doors to rebellious, undisciplined students, often those referred to as “troubled”.

The emergence of new school models reflected the public’s attitude towards the state of education in this country and paved the way for the charter concept. In 1983, the publication *A Nation At Risk* identified a great dissatisfaction with the nation’s public school system. The report challenged that “America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.” This candid account, coupled with the existing reforms, became the major impetus for the charter movement. It was also encouraged

---


by school administrators frustrated with their lack of control over budgets, facilities, and state bureaucracy.

In 1988, two historical figures rose from the ranks to demarcate the movement. A retired school teacher named Ray Budde first suggested the term “charter” in his report “Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts.” He suggested, “Educational charters allow groups of teachers to receive direct funding from the school board for planning and implementing plans for instruction.”

His proposal included an intense course of study with strict graduation requirements and teacher accountability for student success. “Budde’s model allowed the local school board to grant a charter to a group of teachers who would manage the school in exchange for a heightened degree of accountability of their failures and successes.”

The second inspiration for charters was Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Budde laid the brick in the hypothetical “charter school” foundation by conceptualizing it. Shanker took it upon himself to publicize this idea. He revealed his plans during an address given at a Minneapolis conference, where he ascribed to “the idea of giving teachers a chance to create innovative new programs and charter schools.”


of new schools approved directly by the school board and the teachers. With his urging, the AFT endorsed the idea of creating “autonomous public schools within school buildings,” thus establishing the name “charter schools.”

The passage of the first charter school law spawned the rolling of hypothetical ball. In 1991, after a decade of debates, Minnesota became the first state to offer school choice, permitting the opening of forty new charter schools. As Minnesota’s law was nationally recognized, California became the second state to pass charter legislation, permitting up to 100 schools to operate in the state. Colorado and Massachusetts followed suit in 1993, and by 1994, eleven states established charter school laws. The movement soared, and by the end of 1998, thirty-four states and the District of Columbia had passed charter school laws.

**Legal Aspects of Charters**

**Role of the Federal Government**

Federal and state governments play different roles in the charter movement. The Federal government sets accountability standards and regulations for K-12 education, including charter schools, through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Beyond these guidelines, NCLB delegates responsibility to states to develop their own accountability standards and measures. “Education policy is generally a state function. Even the federal NCLB, widely regarded as the biggest federal intrusion into state education policy, provides a great deal of latitude for individual states to

---

11 Ibid., 35.
implement NCLB’s major provisions. The vast majority of regulations concerning education policy originate from state statutes.”¹² As publicly funded schools, charters are accountable not only to state standards but also to the federal requirements of NCLB.

*Federal Statute: No Child Left Behind*

NCLB is organized into four key provisions: stronger accountability for results, greater flexibility for schools in the use of federal funds; more choices for parents of children from disadvantaged backgrounds; and a focus on teaching methods that have yielded achievement.¹³ This combination of provisions is intended to ensure every child receives an excellent education, leaving “no child behind” other students.

NCLB holds states accountable by requiring annual assessments that measure student progress in mathematics and reading in grades 3 through 8. “These tests, based on challenging state standards, will allow parents, educators, administrators, policymakers and the general public to track the performance of every school in the nation.”¹⁴ States must also create annual school report cards of academic achievement, disaggregated based on ethnicity, socioeconomics, and disabilities to

---


¹⁴ Ibid., 5.
highlight the underachieving populations. Each state must have a statewide, consistent set of standards.

Academic progress must be further measured by state designed objectives intended to improve minority student access to academic proficiency. Meeting these objectives is commonly termed “making adequate yearly progress” (AYP). If a school does not make AYP, it is targeted as “needing assistance” and is provided supplemental services. If AYP has not been met for five consecutive years, the school is subject to restructuring.\(^{15}\)

Administrators and teachers at the state level are given the flexibility to determine how federal education funds should be used. Districts are permitted to use funds as they see fit. Parents in low income school districts can choose to transfer their child to a better performing public school if the child’s current school is not meeting state standards for two consecutive years. If they select this option, the district must provide transportation for the student.\(^{16}\) NCLB also provides support toward the creation of charter schools. These alternatives decrease enrollment and limit funding in low-performing schools, leaving them with two options: to improve or to close.

\(^{15}\) \textit{Note:} There is not a single cohesive set of academic standards that applies to schools nationwide. Each state is responsible for creating its own, leaving the standards of proficiency up to the individual state’s interpretation. Students in State A may perform above average on standardized tests, while students in State B, although performing below average on state tests, may have a better mastery of mathematics due to stricter state standards. State standards are left to subjective discretion.

\(^{16}\) \textit{Note:} All schools relocated to must be located within the student’s district.
Lastly, NCLB emphasizes the use of scientific research to determine the best K-12 curricula. This is particularly relevant in the subject of reading, where students are introduced to language arts concepts in pre-school and early kindergarten.

Role and Responsibility of the States

In order to have charter schools, a charter law must exist, and be born at the state level. Charter laws vary greatly from state to state. The strength of the charter model and law is often derived from the growth and activity of a state’s schools. Success of individual schools is determined by a number of factors, the most prominent being accountability, in the form of test results. Because the charter movement is merely a decade old in most states, growth can be one of the greatest indicators of the movement’s initial success.17

Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia have adopted charter laws. According to the Center for Education Reform, over 4,100 charter schools operated during the 2007-2008 school year, serving 1.2 million students. Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia remain the only states without charter laws. Despite the rapid increase in charter legislation over the past decade, the laws are not homogenous and greatly vary in their utility.

17 Note: Further discussion on the components of a strong charter law can be found in Chapter 2.
The country’s strongest charter laws are found in Minnesota, District of Columbia, Michigan, Arizona, California, Florida, Delaware, and Indiana. A total of 21 state charter laws are considered “strong laws”, indicating that they create easy paths for the establishment of schools by a variety of people. The remaining 20 state laws are considered “weak”, largely restricting the number of charter schools permitted and requiring extensive bureaucratic oversight. “There is a direct correlation between strong laws and successful charter schools. Of those states with strong laws, 65 percent showed positive achievement gains last year; of the weak states, only two demonstrated the same level of progress.” Table 1.1 provides the current state charter law rankings.

---


Table 1. Charter School Law Rankings by State\textsuperscript{20}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Charter School Law Rankings: Best to Worst</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The “A” Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honor Roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1)      Minnesota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2)      District of Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3)      Michigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4)      Arizona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5)      California</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6)      Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7)      Delaware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8)      Indiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “B” Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Achievers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9)      Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10)     Missouri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11)     New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12)     Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13)     New Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14)     Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15)     Oregon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16)     Ohio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17)     North Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18)     Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19)     Oklahoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20)     New Jersey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21)     Wisconsin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22)     Nevada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “C” Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23)     Louisiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24)     South Carolina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25)     Utah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26)     Illinois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27)     Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28)     Idaho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29)     New Hampshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30)     Arkansas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31)     Tennessee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32)     Connecticut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33)     Maryland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “D” Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barely Making it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34)     Wyoming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35)     Hawaii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36)     Alaska</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37)     Kansas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38)     Virginia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39)     Rhode Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “F” Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flunked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40)     Iowa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41)     Mississippi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Washington, DC, the geographic focus of this study, holds one of the strongest laws in the country, yielding impressive growth of schools in merely a decade. This law and its impact on DC charter schools are discussed further in chapter 2.

Administrative Directives

Today, over 4,100 charter schools across the nation serve 1.2 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. According to the Center for Education Reform’s Annual Survey of America’s Charter Schools, the public often perceives charters as serving the “cream of the crop.” However, “charter schools continue to serve a disproportionate share of at-risk, minority, and low-income children, who are most adversely affected by the status quo.”

Charters across the nation tend to be smaller than traditional public schools, with an average of 328 students per school in 2007. Due to this smaller size, many charters are forced to hold lotteries to randomly select incoming students, and hold sizeable waitlists. Despite their status as “public” and “free,” they receive less per pupil funding than traditional public schools.

As autonomous, individual schools, charters utilize creative and innovative curricula to appeal to a variety of learners. Schools often have a focus that meet that needs of their specific population. In 2007, 32% of the nation’s charter schools offered student increased instructional time beyond the traditional six and a half hour school day.

Assessments are a key measure of academic achievement, and never has this been clearer than with charters. As states set their own proficiency standards

---


22 Ibid., 4.
measured by individualized tests, a single standardized test must be administered at schools nationwide to determine student proficiency. The Department of Education authorized the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) to test students using the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). NAEP administers tests annually in every geographic region of the country, testing student populations from public, private, and parochial schools.23

As NCLB enters its seventh year of inception, 31% of eighth graders nationally are proficient in mathematics according to NAEP. This represents a 2% increase in proficiency from 2005, when 29% of eighth graders were proficient in mathematics. At a national average, charter school students trail closely behind traditional students. 25% of eighth graders at charter schools across the nation are proficient in mathematics, up 4% from 21% proficient in 2005. In reading, 29% of eighth graders nationally are proficient, consistent with 29% proficiency in 2005. In close comparison, 28% of eighth graders at charter schools across the nation are proficient in reading, up 4% from 24% proficient in 2005. With demonstrated annual growth, early predictors indicate that charters are on the road to producing increasingly proficient students.

---

23 Note: NAEP scores are used consistently in this study as a national measure of student achievement. NAEP is the only federally mandated program that reports such data. Individual state test scores are not useful comparisons as each state’s standards of measure differ.
Conclusion

School choice and competition force schools to continually examine their curricula and improve their education services and overall educational delivery to give children a chance for improved academic achievement. Choice re-asserts the rights of the parent and the best interests of the child over the convenience of the system, infuses accountability and quality into the system, and provides educational opportunity where none existed before.\textsuperscript{24}

As a point of reference to gauge the success of charter schools, it is worthwhile to evaluate schools from states with the strongest charter laws. Much is to be inferred from an analysis of the high achieving schools in these regions. For the purpose of this thesis, the District of Columbia is the focus. The following chapters provide an in depth look at DC’s charter movement, and analyze the success factors of the three highest performing charter middle schools.

Chapter 1 offers a brief history of the birth of charter schools and the progression of the movement. With this contextual framework in mind, Chapter 2 focuses on the Washington, DC charter school movement within a historical, legal, and administrative context. Claiming one of the nation’s strongest charter laws, there is no question that DC has seen instant growth of charter schools since installation of the first school in 1997. As of the 2007-2008 school year, nearly 22,000 children are enrolled in 56 District of Columbia public charter schools.

CHAPTER 2

WASHINGTON, DC CHARTER SCHOOLS: HISTORICAL, LEGAL, AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT

Claiming one of the nation’s strongest charter laws, there is no question that Washington, DC has seen instant growth of charter schools since installation of the first school in 1997. As of the 2007-2008 school year, nearly 22,000 children are enrolled in 56 District of Columbia public charter schools. This chapter provides a summary of the current state of DC charter schools, both as an individual entity and as compared to DC public schools. The evolution of charter schools is then addressed, with a focus on the history of charters in Washington. The statutory roots and growth of the DC movement, from inception to present state, is addressed as well. This overview of DC charter schools concludes with the legal underpinnings and administrative directives of the movement.

Current State of District of Columbia Charter Schools

When it comes to education standards, the District of Columbia falls into an unusual category. “It carries out many of the functions of a state, but lacks the same autonomy or governance structure as a state.”¹ Located in the political Mecca of the nation, the school system serves 77,000 students in 229 schools.² It is the only city in

---


² *Note:* According to NAEP’s DC State profile, 76,876 students were served in 229 traditional public schools and public charter schools. The most recent data available is from the 2005-2006 school year [http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp).
America that is subject to such active congressional oversight. These features continue to shape the city’s charter school movement and overall education policies.

Sara Mead of the Progressive Policy Institute, stated as follows:

> The District of Columbia is a city of contradictions and anomalies…It has some of the nation’s greatest cultural treasures and worst public schools. Twenty-one percent of its residents have graduate or advanced degrees, yet 30 percent lack even a high school diploma. It has a higher per-capita income than any state and a higher poverty rate than all but five states.³

Serving a population of 21,859 students,⁴ the District’s 56 charter schools represent a dynamic and ever present force amongst struggling traditional DC schools. With a total population of 77,000 students, the city’s 229 public schools are becoming increasingly more charter with each passing year (See Chart 2.2). “Today, [traditional] public schools in the District of Columbia enroll less than half the number of students who attended school in 1970, coinciding with both a decline in the general population and an increase in private and charter public school enrollments.”⁵ 55,000 students are enrolled in 158 traditional public schools,⁶ a number that has decreased significantly in the last three years due to charters. “The

---


growth of charter schools in our nation’s capital has been extraordinary. In the 1996-1997 school year, the first [two] public charter schools served just 160 students.7

With an average school size of 277 students, 97% of the charter population represents minority students, similar to the 95% minority representation in traditional public schools. Three quarters of traditional public school students are black, while 11% are Hispanic and 5% are White. Similarly, charters serve a largely African American population, with 83% black students, 11% Hispanic, and 4% white. In the city as a whole, only 56% of the adult population is black.8

Charter schools serve about 11% special education students,9 while closer to 20% of students in traditional public schools require special education services.10 Approximately 75% of charter school students are eligible for free or reduced lunch11, whereas only 53.4% of the entire public school population12 is eligible for free/reduced lunch. About two-thirds of the district’s students live at or below the poverty line. Racial and ethnic groups are unevenly divided amongst the city’s wards, with predominantly black populations living in lowest income neighborhoods.

---


8 Ibid., 8.


12 Ibid.
of Southeast, Southwest, and Northeast Washington. It is in these neighborhoods that most DC charters are located. Their intention is to increase access to good education for the city’s poorest residents.

While charters and traditional public schools serve similar populations, charter schools consistently perform better on annual assessments. Two different assessments provide a point of comparison: the District of Columbia’s state wide test, or the DC Comprehensive Assessment System (DC-CAS), and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Administered annually to grades three through eight, and grade ten, the DC-CAS is required for both traditional and charter schools. NAEP, the single national test of K-12 progress, was commissioned at the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to conduct national and state assessments every two years. Federal law requires that every school receiving Title 1 funds\(^\text{13}\) participate in NAEP reading and mathematics assessments at the fourth and eighth grade levels.

Whereas state tests measure performance based on state curriculum and standards, NAEP results reveal how one state is doing compared to another. The assessments also provide a comparison to the national average, helping states to understand where their student performance lies on the continuum. NAEP’s definition of “proficient,” therefore, varies from each individual state’s definition.

\(^{13}\) Note: All Public schools receive Title 1 funds.
As a city of contradictions, DC falls into an unusual category of comparison. From an assessment standpoint, it is held accountable as a state as compared to the rest of the nation, despite lacking all the privileges of a state. According to the 2007 NAEP assessment, 18% of the District’s fourth grade students are proficient in reading, and 17% are proficient in mathematics. On a national average, 39% of fourth graders are proficient in reading, and 44% are proficient in mathematics. DC’s eighth graders reveal even lower performance, with only 13% proficient in reading and a meager 9% proficient in math. Nationally, 31% of eighth graders are proficient in reading and 38% are proficient in math.

As a sanction of NCLB, each state is required to provide an annual “report card” detailing the state’s assessment results and its efforts to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). For each school, AYP is determined using a formula based on test results, student participation rates, and school attendance. For the past 5 years, most DC public schools have not met AYP, placing the schools into a restructuring status.

Charters consistently outperform traditional public schools on the DC-CAS, while serving the DC populations most in need. In 2007, 38% of charter school students were proficient in elementary mathematics, compared to 29% of traditional public school students. In elementary reading, 43% of charter school students were proficient.14


15 Note: In compliance with NCLB, the DC-CAS scores students based on four performance levels: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. These levels have no connection to NAEP levels of proficiency.
proficient, compared to only 37% of traditional public school students. Charter school students continued this pattern in secondary math, where 48.5% were proficient compared to only 27.8% of traditional public school students. In secondary reading, 47.8% of charter students were proficient, where only 29.8% of traditional public students were proficient. The gap between these proficiency levels continues to widen each year.

Often considered a more accurate measure of student achievement, NAEP scores reveal the disparities between traditional public and charter schools, as well as the extent to which DC as a whole falls behind the national average. Charters outperformed traditional public schools in eighth grade math and reading, but just barely. According to 2007 NAEP assessments, 10% of charter school students are proficient in eighth grade mathematics, up from 7% in 2005. 9% of traditional public school students are proficient in eighth grade math, consistent with 2005. In eighth grade reading, 15% of charter school students are proficient, up from 11% in 2005. Traditional public school students are 12% proficient in eighth grade reading, a slight decrease from 13% in 2005. DC charter schools are slowly but surely increasing student proficiency and outperforming traditional public schools.

NAEP assessments further revealed that 61% of charter students have a basic knowledge of eighth grade math, as compared with only 42% of traditional students. This leaves 58% of traditional public schools students at a below basic level in eighth grade math. Similarly, 45% of charter students have a basic knowledge of eighth
grade reading, as compared with only 29% of traditional students. In 2007, an astounding 71% of traditional public school students scored below basic in eighth grade reading assessments. In the past three years, traditional public schools have seen an increase in the number of students scoring at the basic or below basic level. Student performance in DCPS is declining each year.

The past decade has seen a multitude of school types, serving the needs of a variety of the District’s students. A charter school exists for every age, from preschool through adulthood, with the largest number serving elementary school students. There are charter schools that serve bilingual learners and special education needs. Others focus on policy, law, science, or the arts. Roughly half claim to employ a standards based curriculum. The remaining schools utilize comprehensive school design, student centered pedagogies, arts-integrated, or back-to-basics ‘traditional’ curricula.16 “Charter schools are not a monolith. Within the charter school sector, there is incredible diversity – of students, staff, programs, approaches, philosophies, performance, authorizer approaches, and more.17

With the exception of a single “conversion” charter school, all current public charters are new start-up schools. In September 2008, seven private Catholic schools reopened as “converted” charter schools. Non-for-profit management companies,

---


17 Ibid., 12.
such as Edison Schools, Imagine Schools, Friendship Schools, and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) operate roughly 20% of the District’s charters.

**Historical Context of DC Charters**

The DC charter school movement emerged in 1996 during a time at which great tensions existed between District leaders and Congress. Control over city affairs was greatly disputed between the two groups, a pattern that is reflective of its historical relationship.

Washington, DC began fighting the battle for self-government in 1802 when citizens petitioned Congress for a municipal charter. This charter made Washington an incorporated city, allowed for a president-appointed mayor, and permitted voters to elect a local legislature, or Council. Citizens spent the next century protesting for complete self-governance and representation in Congress. In 1963, District residents received the right to vote in presidential elections, followed by the authority to elect a School Board in 1967. By 1970, the District was granted a nonvoting delegate in the House of Representatives. Each of these milestones represented a small step toward autonomous governance, but Congress continued to control most District activity.

The pivotal change occurred in 1973, when the Home Rule Act passed in Congress. It established the DC City Council, prompting citizens to elect a mayor and Council during fall of 1974. “The powers and duties of the Council are comparable to those held by state, county, and city legislatures, including the authority to adopt laws and to approve the District’s annual budget submitted by the
Mayor.” The Council acts as a system of checks and balances to the Mayor’s position; similar to other state governments. Under the Home Rule Act, Congress continues to review all legislation passed by the Council before it is signed into law and authorizes the District’s budget. Congressional voting representation has not been granted to the District, thus eliminating its voice on crucial issues like education. An ongoing strain between Congress and the Council continues as District residents push for complete local autonomy and representation.\(^{19}\)

In 1995, the year before the birth of DC charter schools, City Council and Congressional tensions were running rampant. The District was experiencing ongoing financial difficulties and management issues. Under President Clinton, Congress asserted itself to take over the DC government, placing it under the leadership of a Fiscal Control board. With this control, the House’s newly gained Republican majority created legislation to revamp the District’s public services, particularly education. House speaker Newt Gingrich appointed Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-Wis.) to draft the education reforms. After meeting with numerous District officials and residents, Rep. Gunderson assembled a proposal of the following ideas “to find solutions to the complex education challenges facing Washington, DC”\(^{20}\):


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

• Respect the principle of Home Rule while ensuring improved education for DC Students

• Create a world-class system of lifetime learning that is on par with the best in other leading nations

• Empower families of limited means with enhanced educational choices

• Engage local and national groups in a public/private partnership to improve education in our nation’s capital

• Design and implement an urban education delivery system that can serve as a model for the nation to follow

• Create a partnership between the District of Columbia, Congress, the private sector and local community\(^\text{21}\)

Under this proposal, the District’s school board and superintendent developed a comprehensive five-year reform plan, which included sanctions regarding student achievement, performance-based employment, family involvement in schools, facility improvements, and expanding charter schools.\(^\text{22}\) This collaboration of ideas evolved into the \textit{School Reform Act} of 1995. Controversy between the House and Senate delayed the bill’s passage until 1996. In the original proposal, a suggested “voucher program” became a contentious issue on all sides. This both aided and debilitated the impending charter school movement. The final legislation was less extensive than

\(^{21}\) Ibid., J03.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Gunderson’s original 1995 proposal, but included a “strong charter school provision.” Thus, the District’s charter law was born.

Growth from Inception to Present

The passage of the School Reform Act in April 1996 did not allow new charter schools sufficient time to open on even footing for the fall semester. Regardless, five schools were authorized by the Board of Education (BOE) over the summer of 1996, and three planned to quickly open in September. However, the BOE was not focusing on these charter schools. In Fall 1996, serious facilities problems delayed the opening of many District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). As a result, the Financial Control Board took control of DCPS and reappointed a new superintendent, which created power struggles and great hostility. Charters took a back burner to the ever-present fiscal problems.

In February 1997, the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) was created as a second authorizer of charter schools, next to the BOE. “The PCSB took a more considered approach to chartering than the Board of Education, hiring expert consultants who put together a comprehensive approval and accountability process for charter schools that is considered to be one of the strongest in the nation.”

---


24 Ibid., 9.
the end of the summer, PCSB had received 26 charter applications. The BOE, which resumed accepting applications, received eight.

With the advent of a second chartering authorizer, the group of schools chartered and opened in fall 1998 marked the beginning of DC’s robust and profound charter school movement. During the 1998-1999 academic year, charter schools grew from two schools to seventeen, serving over 3,600 students. It was in this formative year that several excellent schools were opened.

This surge of new charter schools created concern amongst District leaders, particularly regarding funding and student/teacher retention. During the 1998 mayoral race to succeed Marion Barry, candidates added charter opinions to their platforms. Anthony Williams, later elected to the post, supported charter growth combined with consistent monitoring. Unfortunately, the current superintendent, Arlene Ackerman, did not share this sentiment. When the first traditional public school was approved by PCSB to convert to a charter, Ackerman attempted to take away the school’s facility. Although Congress’s Financial Control Board overruled this decision, these actions represent the controversy that continues to surround this movement.

As charter numbers increased in 1999 and 2000, they “were increasingly recognized as an element of the District’s educational landscape, with a growing

\[25\] Ibid.

\[26\] Note: Two of these schools, Friendship-Edison Public Charter Woodridge campus and SEED (School for Educational Evolution and Development) Public Charter School, are analyzed further in the case studies to follow.
constituency of parents, educators, and a network of supporters influential in both District and congressional politics. In 2000, the Congressionally appointed Financial Control Board finally returned complete school authority to the Board of Education (BOE). With this, District residents elected a reformed school board to take over, and a new superintendent was appointed. Both entities were charter supporters, insisting on accountability for the District’s lowest performing schools.

Between 2000 and 2008, the District’s charter schools saw tremendous growth. In 2002, there were 20 charter schools on 25 campuses. By 2006, 34 charter schools resided on 43 campuses. Today, in 2008, 56 schools operate on 82 campuses. As indicated in figure 1, the number of DC charters has nearly tripled in the past six years.

Figure 1. Public Charter School and Campus Proliferation

The charter student population has also grown significantly in this decade. In 2000, 6,530 DC students attended public charter schools. Student enrollment jumped to 11,452 in 2003. In 2008, 22,347 students are enrolled in DC charter schools. As figure 2 reveals, the numbers of students enrolled in charters has more than tripled since 2000. This steady increase was due largely to the expansion of PCSB authorized schools, as enrollment in BOE schools remained constant.

![PCS Annualized Growth](image-url)

**Figure 2.** DC Public Charter Schools annualized growth  

**Legal Underpinnings**

**Washington, DC Charter Law**

The enormous progression of Washington, DC’s charter movement is due largely to its charter law. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), the
District of Columbia’s charter law is the second strongest of the nation’s forty-one laws. 28 “The effectiveness of charter schools is directly related to the strength of the underlying laws. States with the strongest laws have the most successful schools and parents in those states are getting the best educational value,” 29 says CER President Jeanne Allen.

Strong charter laws allow flexibility and autonomy in a variety of areas. In states with strong laws, numerous types of applicants may submit charter school proposals. Multiple agencies are authorized to approve charter proposals. Large numbers of new schools may be added each year. Once in operation, charters in ‘strong law states’ are given legal autonomy and waivers from most state and district education laws and regulations. Teachers can be hired and fired at will. Per-pupil funding, at the amount available to traditional public schools, is equally available to charters. Table 2.1 provides a more in depth look at the criteria for determining a strong charter law.

---


29 Ibid.
Table 2. Criteria For a Strong Charter Law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Schools</td>
<td>A large or unlimited number of charter schools allows for more activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Chartering Authorities / Binding Appeals Process</td>
<td>Permitting authorizing agencies beyond local school boards, and offering an appeals process, increases activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of Applicants</td>
<td>Limiting the types of applicants permitted to submit charter proposals discourages growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Starts</td>
<td>Allowing for the start up of new schools, as opposed to converting an existing school, encourages activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools may start without third-party consent</td>
<td>Permitting schools without third party or neighboring district consent promotes growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automatic Waiver from laws and regulations</td>
<td>Blanket waivers from state or district education laws, regulations, and policies spurs school growth more than providing no waivers or negotiated waivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal / Operational Autonomy</td>
<td>States that allow charter schools to be independent legal entities – permitting them to own property, sue and be sued, incur debt, control budget and personnel, and contract for services – encourages more charter activity than in states where charter schools are under district jurisdiction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guaranteed Full Funding</td>
<td>When 100% of per-pupil funding follows students into charter schools, greater growth of charters occurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Autonomy</td>
<td>Charter schools with full control over their own budgets have greater autonomy, thus increased activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemption from collective bargaining agreements / district work rules</td>
<td>Granting charters complete control over personnel decisions increases activity compared to schools where teachers remain subject to collective bargaining agreements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data from The Center for Education Reform, *Charter School Laws Across the States: Rankings and Scorecard, 10th Edition*
At the inception of DC’s charter law, it allowed for multiple authorizers – first, the DC Board of Education (BOE) and later, the District’s Public Charter School Board (PCSB). In recent years, mixed reviews of the BOE have led authorities to designate PCSB as the single charter authorizer. This is discussed further under “Authorizers,” following this section.

Last amended in 2005, the District’s law is particularly strong in its financial provisions. Most prominent is the equal or greater per-pupil funding that charter schools receive, in comparison to traditional public schools. Both are funded using the Uniform Per-Student Funding Formula (UPSFF). UPSFF is based on a foundation amount that increases annually, with additional funding for special school types. This operational funding is supplemented by a generous per-pupil facilities allotment, as charter schools do not receive funding from the city’s capital budget like DCPS. DC charter schools have complete legal autonomy and are recognized as separate agencies, allowing for total operational independence. They are also candidates for federal funding to aid in start-up and expansion initiatives.

A crucial component of the law is the number of new schools permitted annually. At 20 new charters per year, this provision doubled the number of charter schools between 2000 and 2008, jumping from 28 to 56 schools. Multiple chartering authorities grant approval for new schools, accepting applications from any person, group, organization, or post-secondary institution, be it public or private. Once
approved, charter contracts have a generous fifteen-year term. A comprehensive view of the law’s provisions can be found in Appendix 1.

**Administrative Directives**

**Authorizers**

As a provision of the School Reform Act of 1996, multiple authorizers are permitted to grant charters to new District schools. As mentioned previously, the Board of Education (BOE) was the original authorizer of the city’s charter schools. After the Public Charter School Board (PCSB) was created, the decade that followed revealed it consistently received a greater number of charter applications than the BOE. As a result, this enabled the PCSB to open a larger number of schools. Table 3 outlines the charter approvals by each authorizer over the past decade.

---

31 **Note:** As a result, PCSB has seen student enrollment steadily increase year after year, as enrollments in BOE schools leveled off. For more information, see figure 2 above.
Table 3. History of DC Charter School Approvals$^{32}$

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>BOARD OF EDUCATION</th>
<th>PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applications Received $^{33}$</td>
<td>Charters Approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, in November 2006, the BOE voted “to relinquish its authority to establish and oversee public charter schools.”$^{34}$ This occurred simultaneously with Mayor Adrian Fenty’s proposal to take control over DCPS. In April 2007, the City Council approved legislation supporting Fenty’s plan and passed the Education Reform Act of 2007. This officially transferred all charter authorization


$^{33}$ Note: The numbers of charters approved each year reflects those charter schools that are still actively operating, and does not take into account the dozen plus schools that have closed over the last decade.

responsibility to the PCSB, increasing its portfolio from 37 charters to all 56 charters.\footnote{DC Watch Online Magazine, “DC Public Education Reform Amendment Act of 2007, Bill 17-001,” http://www.dcreform.com/council17/17-001.htm (accessed February 2008).} According to chairman Thomas Nida, “The DC Public Charter School Board (PCSB) has become a national and international model of how to approve, hold accountable, and when necessary, close public charter schools. This year, Mayor Fenty placed his confidence in this board by assigning the PCSB oversight responsibility of all DC public charter schools.”\footnote{Josephine C. Baker, \textit{District of Columbia Public Charter School Board Annual Report 2007}, (Washington, DC: Public Charter School Board, July 30, 2007), 2.}

Authorization Process

When an interested party wishes to submit a new charter, PCSB provides a detailed application process to ensure that all aspects of school plans are considered. Annually, PCSB releases application guidelines each January for the coming year’s applicants. The 2008 guidelines “addressed an identified need to ‘establish and maintain a portfolio of schools offering diversity in populations served, educational services, and geographic locations.’”\footnote{DC Public Charter School Board, “2008 Application Guidelines to start a public charter school,” http://www.depubliccharter.com/startschool/docs/AppGuidelines2008.pdf (accessed June 2008).} The guidelines stress the need for additional middle schools, high schools, vocational education, adult education, and special education schools.
Charter applications are due each year on March 31st. In April and May, PCSB conducts qualitative reviews of applications, principal interviews, and holds public hearings. This gives the public an opportunity to express their support or concerns for the proposed charters. By mid-June, the Board makes the decision to deny, approve, or conditionally approve each charter school application. Under DC Law, PCSB is authorized to approve up to twenty charter school applications in any given year.

Accountability

While charter schools are independently operated, their oversight by PCSB is accountable to the Mayor, City Council, taxpayers, parents, and students. The Board must effectively oversee all charters, while offering support to struggling schools and engaging all relevant stakeholders.

“DC public charter schools accept a greater degree of accountability, in exchange for more autonomy than most non-charter schools.”\(^{38}\) As in traditional public schools, charters are accountable to the provisions of NCLB, which mandates that each state assess students in mathematics and reading at the elementary and secondary levels. The District of Columbia tests students annually in English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. In addition, the National Assessment of

Educational Progress (NAEP) administers tests every two years to students nationwide, testing reading and mathematics in fourth and eighth grade.

Schools undergo annual reviews of their program development and business practices. In the event that a school does not consistently meet NCLB and PCSB standards, it is subject to increased monitoring. In the event that action must be taken, PCSB uses a “table of remedies,”\(^{39}\) providing first time offenders with a notice of concern, and repeat offenders with a notice of probation or revocation.

At the end of each five year period, all charter schools partake in a high stakes charter review. Schools are measured against the terms of their individual charter and previously set performance goals. The schools that meet these goals “and demonstrate an upward trajectory are granted continuance for an additional five years.”\(^{40}\) A school that does not meet its goals is subject to charter revocation and closure. In the event that a new charter exhibits continued academic or financial failures; PCSB has the authority to shut down such a school after its third year of operation. The ability to seamlessly close low performing schools is a clear advantage of the DC charter school model.

Charter schools are also accountable to parents, who remain crucial stakeholders in the charter school race. As schools of choice, parents may remove their children from an under-performing charter school at any time. This reduces the

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
amount of per pupil funding that a school receives, thus increasing the likelihood of school closure.

**Conclusion**

Within the realm of consistently underperforming public schools, charters continue to grow and multiply, some with much success, others with less. Washington DC now has one of the most dynamic charter school movements, estimated to “become a majority charter district in about six years, with charter schools on a ‘run rate’ to reach 51% market share (of all public school students in the District) in 2014.”[41] The ‘aggressive’ charter school law has enabled much of this progress.

While both the DC-CAS and NAEP assessments reveal that charters outperform traditional public schools, it is evident that huge strides must be made to bring the majority of Washington’s students to a level of academic proficiency. Critical to assessment comparison is the consideration of indicators beyond student success. Test scores are just one of many factors that define a successful school. Teacher quality, curriculum, teaching methodology, school leadership, professional environment, and discipline systems[42] are just a few of the many other attributes that

---


impact a school’s ability to educate its students. In order to identify and to define the attributes of success, the next section will offer three case studies of high performing Washington, DC charter middle schools. The analysis of each school offers a snapshot of values and attributes bringing students to success.
CHAPTER 3
THREE CASE STUDIES

Introduction

The schools profiled in the following case studies are the highest performing public middle schools in Washington, DC. For the past four years, each school has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in reading, math, and attendance, with a more proficient student population than any other DC public school. The schools serve a similar population: 99% of students are African American and 60% to 75% qualify for free lunch. Each has been in existence for at least four years. Charter schools require three to five years to stabilize operations, and each school model has a solid foundation in place.

Located in socio-economically disadvantaged quadrants of our nation’s capital, each school provides students with an outstanding academic education, opening the doors to college and a successful life. Research underscores that the middle school years are pivotal to a student’s learning. If reading and math proficiency is not achieved by the middle school years, students are too far behind to ensure enough academic progress to graduate high school.

While each school achieves measurable success, the case studies reflect the differing models employed by each institution. One school is strictly a middle school, serving students from fifth through eighth grade. Another enrolls students as
soon as they can walk, housing preschool through eighth grade. The final school is
the first of its kind: a public charter boarding school, serving students in seventh
through twelve grades. It is through the attributes and values of these models that a
greater number of Washington, DC students are graduating from high school and
attending college.
Introduction

Friendship Woodridge Public Charter School is a top performing elementary and middle school educating underserved inner city students in Northeast Washington. Opened in 1998, it serves 665 students in preschool through eighth grade, 99% of which are African American. Sixty percent of the student population is considered low income. “The mission of Friendship Public Charter School is to prepare students to become ethical, literate, well rounded, and self-sufficient students by providing a world-class education that motivates students to reach high academic standards, to enjoy learning, to achieve success, and to contribute actively to their communities.”

History

Friendship Woodridge belongs to the non-profit organization Friendship Public Charter School, which is largest charter school in Washington, DC. Founded in 1997 by Chairman and CEO Donald Hense, Friendship PCS operates five campuses across DC, serving 4,000 students in preschool through twelve grades. “Children in DC deserve the same opportunities as children in the affluent suburbs.

---

That’s what we’re striving to provide,’ says Hense, who partnered with Edison Schools to develop the Friendship system.” Edison provided $30 million in loans for the renovation of school sites, in addition to support with hiring, training, and implementing the Edison curriculum.

In 1998, Friendship PCS opened its first two schools, Chamberlain Elementary and Woodridge Elementary and Middle. Blow Pierce Junior Academy opened in 1999, followed by Collegiate Academy High School in 2000. Its fifth school, Southeast Academy, opened in 2005. With the goal of reaching as many students as possible, the organization is expanding rapidly. Two new schools opened in Fall 2008 in Baltimore, serving students from sixth through twelve grades. Friendship PCS plans to open a second high school in the District across from Southeast Elementary.

Every Friendship school provides low-income students access to a superior education. “Friendship applies its unique educational model with winning results — Friendship consistently improves academic performance, educates the "whole child," offers families wraparound social services, and directs students to college and a solid, rewarding future.” Friendship was accrediting by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools in May 2004.

---


School Design and Academic Program

Friendship’s scholastic approach is to educate the “whole child” both academically and socially. “FPCS students benefit from a research based instructional design, caring and well-trained teachers, up-to-date instructional technology, strong leadership, and high levels of community involvement.” As a public charter school, Friendship Woodridge has no admission requirements. However, current students and siblings of current students receive enrollment priority. Spaces are available in preschool through third grade, and eligible students are encouraged to enroll at Woodridge. In the case of enrollment, eligible applicants are placed on a waiting list and a lottery is held.

Academics

Friendship Woodridge’s academic program is driven by high standards and transparent results. The student population is divided into two separate age groups, to allow for appropriate social development. Preschool through fifth grades make up the elementary school. Sixth, seventh, and eighth grades comprise the junior academy. The school day runs officially from 8am to 4pm, with the majority of students remaining into the evening for extracurricular activities.

---

Woodridge’s middle school classrooms are, as the school’s motto states, “where eagles soar.”5 When a student reaches the junior academy, he or she typically has been at Woodridge for at least five or six years. Therefore, the student’s knowledge base is at or above grade level, and he or she is familiar with the expectations of Friendship. This allows science, technology, and college exploration to be emphasized during the junior academy years. Students study reading, language arts, world history, US history, math, Spanish, and fine arts. The science curriculum utilizes the Science Plus 3 Year program, which connects theory and practice over consecutive years. Each classroom is equipped with a computer, projector, and large screen. Campus SmartLabs provide students with access to the newest technology to complete project based learning activities.

Campus Configuration

Woodridge’s campus is designed with separate learning spaces for the elementary school and the junior academy, connected by common shared spaces. The elementary school classrooms, health room, and administrative offices are housed in what was originally a DC public school building. A shared cafeteria connects the brick elementary school building with a brand new second building. Junior academy classrooms, the gym, library, technology rooms, science labs, and the principal’s office are housed in this building. Outside, a spacious parking lot adjoins a colorful, large playground, built by the students themselves.

5 Note: “Where Eagles Soar” is Woodridge’s school motto.
The school’s library serves as a central meeting place for the elementary and junior academy students. A variety of books, magazines, and reference materials are available for check-out, encouraging students to read independently for thirty minutes each day. A library media specialist staffs the library to assist with electronic, print, video, and nontraditional information sources. Classes are frequently held in the library to utilize its ample resources.

**Beyond the Classroom**

**Character Development**

In developing the whole person, Friendship created a code of conduct to guide all facets of school life. This code stems from Friendship’s core values, which provide a model to live by. Core values include integrity, responsibility, confidence, caring, commitment, patience, persistence, and respect. They are posted as a visible reminder throughout Woodridge’s campus.

In the Code of Conduct, “Friendship PCS articulates its commitment to creating a safe and nurturing learning environment in which all students have the best possible opportunities to thrive both academically and socially.”

use peaceful words to resolve conflict, understand that actions have consequences, and uphold a positive representation of Friendship at all times.

Discipline

When a student violate Woodridge’s Code of Conduct, he or she is subject to a number of corrective actions, including additional work assignments, reprimand, detention, exclusion of privilege, or in-school suspension. During in-school suspension, a student must report to school but is removed from all classes and activities. Instead, he or she must remain in a designated suspension room, where they complete school assignments in silence. The duration of the in-school suspension is based on the severity of the behavior. The school has a zero tolerance policy towards violence, drugs, or weapons. These actions may result in an immediate suspension. The Friendship PCS Parent Handbook identifies a variety of infractions and the resulting disciplinary action.

A Day in the Life

Some students arrive at Woodridge as early as 7am to attend Friendship CARES.\(^7\) The optional program offers before and after school enrichment, including arts, dance, poetry, sports, and computers. Homeroom begins at 8am, and students must report on time and in perfect uniform, or risk disciplinary action. Junior Academy students spend the morning in block schedule courses such as language arts

\(^7\) Note: Friendship CARES serves as a before and after school care program for Woodridge students. There is a charge of $70 per child per week, with scholarships available to families in need.
and history. During class changes, they may use the restroom, drink at the water fountain, or visit their locker. Upbeat jazz music plays overhead during this time, with a voice signifying “two minutes before the final bell….one minute before the final bell.” This audible reminder ensures students are on track and on time for class.

From half past eleven until one o’clock, students report to the cafeteria in shifts to enjoy a hot lunch. Junior Academy students spend the afternoon completing science experiments in the second floor labs, exercising in Physical Education (PE), and solving math challenges in the SmartLab. The school day officially ends at four o’clock, but for most students, it is only half over. Students participate in a number of organizations, including choir, double dutch club, Spanish club, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, robotics team, debate team, and jazz band. Adult advisors provide training and guidance, leading student to participate in local and national competitions. Others practice with the basketball team or the cheerleading squad. As a Junior Academy student, afternoons may be spent researching high school college preparatory programs or editing application essays. Many students remain on campus until 7pm at Friendship CARES, where they complete homework and receive tutoring in reading and math.

Extracurricular Support

Woodridge students are surrounded by a multitude of resources to ensure their academic and social success. In addition to the Friendship CARES extended learning program and afternoon clubs, students participate in tutoring and intervention
programs to increase their math and reading proficiency. Woodridge houses a learning strategy center, where students go during and after school to receive supplemental services. Woodridge offers its students extensive support beyond the classroom. Counseling staff are available daily to all students. Woodridge’s special education students are supported within the classroom inclusion model. Special education teachers work with students in a regular classroom setting, evaluating student progress and providing pull-out instruction if necessary.

For further support, the Woodridge Saturday Learning Camp is an optional free program providing mathematics and reading enrichment to students from 9am to 1pm each Saturday. For students who have not achieved grade level proficiency at the end of the academic year, summer school courses provide more personal instruction. To be promoted to the next grade, students be on time and in uniform to receive credit for the month long program.

Athletics

Woodridge takes a proactive approach to health. Every student participates in 45 minutes of physical education daily. Sports teams include co-ed basketball, cheerleading, and step. Woodridge partners with the Butterflies and Joey program to provide students and families with nutrition, exercise, weight, and blood pressure management. Teachers and administrators encourage healthy eating and promote a positive self-image.
Family & Community

Many enrichment programs are possible only because of the generous support of community partners. These include the Scripps Washington Informer Spelling Bee, Arena Stage Playwrights, Washington Performing Arts Society, Dance Institute of Washington, Shakespeare Theater, The National Building Museum, Run for the Arts Program, National Poetry Slam and the Kennedy Center.

Parental support is an integral component to the success of Friendship Woodridge. The Office of Parent Relations serves as the “personal connection” between family and school, providing opportunities for school tours, classroom observations, teacher meetings, and home visits. A monthly newsletter highlights important dates, campus events, and educational tips. Parents are celebrated and constantly encouraged to become involved in their child’s learning. On the Parent Advisory Council, parents serve as school leaders, emphasizing the value of families in student success.

“It is critical for parents/guardians to be actively engaged in their children’s education and to understand the academic progress that your child makes throughout the year.”8 Mandatory Student and Teacher Accountability Report (STAR) days are held several times a year. Parents review student progress reports with teachers, discuss behavior modification plans, and create improvement goals for the student.

---

“Ongoing efforts by parents to enhance the educational experience of their students will produce results.”

Closing the Achievement Gap

In its tenth year of operation, Friendship Woodridge boasts high achievement and solid test scores. Its network of area charter schools provides constant support on proven teaching methods and accountability standards. Test scores reveal that students become increasingly proficient with each additional year at Friendship. In 2007, 40% of fifth graders were proficient in reading, and 44% were proficient in mathematics. In seventh grade, 70% of students were proficient in reading and 66% were proficient in math. By eighth grade, all students are at or above a basic comprehension level. Nearly 75% are proficient in reading, and 71% are proficient in math. Friendship Woodridge has made AYP every year since 2004.

Table 4: Friendship-Woodridge Public Charter School DC-CAS Performance by Grade (Percent represented in each category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>READING</th>
<th>MATH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8.20</td>
<td>42.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>54.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>36.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10.39</td>
<td>44.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>24.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>28.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>25.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


---

9 Ibid., 32.

10 Note: Percentages given reflect the number of proficient students combined with the number of advanced students in a given subject.
Nominated as a Blue Ribbon School, national leaders recognize the success of Woodridge’s program. President Bush and Secretary of Education Margaret Spelling visited the school’s SmartLabs, and Laura Bush led fifth graders through a lesson on malaria. With continued growth, Friendship Woodridge strives to tailor its curriculum and program to the needs of its students, maintaining the quality of its teachers and administrators along with strong family partnerships.
Knowledge is Power Program: Key Academy

Introduction

KIPP DC: KEY Academy, which stands for “Knowledge Empowers You”, is the highest performing public middle school in Washington, DC. Opened in Fall 2001, the charter school serves 320 students in fifth through eighth grade in southeast Washington. With a 99% African American, 75% low income population, KEY promotes academic success with the motto, “no shortcuts, no excuses.” KEY’s mission is “to prepare students with the academic, intellectual, and character skills necessary for success in high school, college, and the competitive world beyond.”

History

KIPP: KEY Academy belongs to a network of public charter schools founded by Teach for America alumni Michael Feinberg and David Levin. The first KIPP school opened in 1995 as a fifth grade academic program in Houston, Texas. It achieved such success that Levin replicated it, opening a second school in the Bronx, New York in 1996. Today, there are 57 KIPP schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia, serving over 14,000 students. “KIPP schools are free, open-enrollment, college-preparatory public schools where under-served students develop the knowledge, skills, and character traits needed to succeed in college and the

---

competitive world beyond.” Each school is responsible for its own operations. Its connection to the KIPP network signifies the school’s commitment to offering students the opportunity to achieve, with the belief that underserved students can perform as well as their suburban counterparts.

Feinberg and Levin believe “great schools require great leaders.” To cultivate excellent KIPP school leaders, the *Fisher Fellowship Program* was developed by Feinberg, Levin, and Don & Doris Fisher, the founders of Gap. “The program recruits, selects, and trains excellent educators to plan, open, and lead their own KIPP schools.” Susan Schaffer, a graduate of the Fisher Fellowship Program, founded the KIPP DC Organization. In 2001, she opened the first school, KEY Academy. Located initially in an Anacostia church basement, the school currently resides in the historic “Blue Castle” school building in southeast Washington. Today it is the highest performing middle school in the District.

With the success of KEY Academy, KIPP DC opened three additional schools: two middle schools and one elementary school. The organization aims to launch ten more schools over the next decade, with the goal of serving over 3,000 students.

---


14 Ibid.
KIPP schools around the country are all structured around five defining “pillars”: high expectations, choice and commitment, more time, power to lead, and focus on results. Schools define measurable high expectations for academics and behavior, and teachers model this culture constantly. Every student attending a KIPP school makes a choice and commitment to be there and to succeed. Emphasized in the slogan, “no shortcuts,” the KIPP creates more time for learning with an extended school day and Saturday sessions. School administrators are given the power to lead autonomously to create great schools. All schools have a strong focus on results with the expectation of success in high school and college.

School Design and Academic Program

KEY Academy employs a rigorous academic program, emphasizing the core subjects in order to bring entering fifth grade students up to grade level. “The KIPP DC community holds one another to high standards, cognizant that success and happiness can be achieved by all, regardless of challenging circumstances, through teamwork, tenacity, and focused dedication.” ¹⁵ Each January, enrollment opens for the following school year. As a public school, KEY does not have admissions requirements. Applications cannot be faxed or mailed; rather, parents must deliver them in person to the school. If KEY receives more applications that it can accommodate, a lottery is held in early April. The majority of students chosen from

the lottery are entering fifth graders, as returning students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade are given priority, leaving very few open spaces in the upper grades.

Commitment and involvement of families is stressed from the start. After a student is admitted, his or her family must meet with KIPP administrators to complete a KIPP Orientation Team meeting (KOT), where KIPP’s family expectations are emphasized. Parents, students, and teachers each must sign KIPP’s contract, agreeing to adhere to the school’s expectations. Students are not officially enrolled until the KOT is complete and all contracts are signed.

Academics

Students participate in a rigorous college preparatory program infused with character building and life skills training. Typically, fifth grade students enter KEY two years below grade level. This first year is focused entirely on bringing students up to grade level. Instruction concentrates on mathematics, reading, and writing, and an extended day provides the background for constant learning. “Fifth graders make average gains of 40 percentile points in reading and 63 percentile points in math in just one year at KIPP DC.”16

Students report to school from 7:45am to 5pm on Mondays through Thursdays, until 3pm on Fridays, and from 9am to 1pm three Saturdays a month. “During the week, all students start the day with a half-hour of critical thinking

16 Ibid.
problem solving activities. Students then engage in six to seven hours of instruction that includes reading, writing, math, social studies, science, and Spanish.\textsuperscript{17} Sixth, seventh and eighth grade students partake in subjects such as algebra, chemistry, and college level literature, in preparation for college preparatory high schools and college.

In July, students participate in a mandatory three-week summer school program. New students learn KEY’s routines, procedures, and high expectations, while current students focus on enrichment learning. On average, students at KEY Academy spend 65% more time in the classroom, as compared with traditional DC public school students.

Character Building

KEY Academy’s model of character building stems from two systems deliberately intertwined into daily school life. The first is a system of lingo that is used as daily behavior reminders or motivation. Teachers declare, “Track me!” or emphasize the school “credo” to encourage students to earn “KEY cash” on their weekly “paycheck.” New students are initiated into the school culture through an intense three week orientation on procedures and expectations. In every classroom, there is an extreme sense of making every moment count, and anyone that causes distraction is immediately and consistently disciplined.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
The second character building system revolves around weekly behavior reports or “paychecks.” The paycheck system monitors daily behavior and homework completion. Students “earn” KEY cash for being on task, excelling academically, demonstrating good citizenship, or performing a class job. If students arrive late, forget their homework, wear incorrect dress code, or are disruptive, they lose money on their paychecks. Teachers track behavior in every class, and the paycheck balance goes home to parents each Friday. If a parent-signed paycheck is not returned on Monday, the student’s balance is not counted. Students must maintain a certain balance to attend field trips and the end of the year school trip.

Paychecks encourage positive behavior, as students can use their KEY cash daily to purchase supplies, uniform shirts, novelty items at the school store.

KEY’s lingo and paycheck system support a structure of specific, transparent procedures. A policy or rule is in place for every action, and these systems serve as constant reminders of a student’s ability to choose the correct action.

**Discipline**

When students repeatedly misbehave or violate the terms of the school contract, in school suspension known as “The Bench” is used. “While on the Bench we hope to remove all distractions so that the child can focus strictly on academics. We use the term “Benched” to show the child that they are still part of the team,
However, they are not playing in the game.\textsuperscript{18} When benched, students are expected to attend all classes and completed all course work. However, they are not permitted to interact with any other students, attend field trips, or earn money toward their paychecks. Silent lunch is spent in a room where the student completes homework. Students are benched for behaviors such as lying, teasing, using inappropriate language, or leaving campus without permission.

KEY implements a strict “gadget” (cell phone, mp3 players, games, etc) policy, going as far as suspending any student who makes a cell phone call during the day without permission. The Academy upholds zero tolerance for fighting, weapons, and drug possession. A student committing one of these behaviors may be immediately expelled. All behavior expectations and ramifications are outlined in contract form, signed by both students and parents. Violation of the contract terms may result in expulsion.

**Beyond the Classroom**

**A Day in the Life**

A typical KEY Academy student rises at 6:30am in preparation for a 7:45am school arrival. After eight, students are considered late and lose “KEY cash”. KEY maintains a strict uniform policy of khaki bottoms and KEY academy polo shirts. Students are easily identifiable by grade level, as entering fifth graders wear green

polo shirts, and graduate to a new color in each grade that follows. Breakfast is served in the school cafeteria while the students complete a silent morning problem solving activity or conference with a teacher. Morning academics begin at 8:30am, when students participate in two block schedule subject periods. For example, a sixth grade attends an hour and a half of math followed by an hour and a half of reading. During class, teachers create a strong sense of urgency to learn and to achieve. Students are taught to track the teacher and one another, giving their undivided attention to whoever is speaking.

From 11:45am to 12:15pm, students enjoy a hot lunch, and are permitted to spend paycheck earnings at the school store. Afternoon classes run until 3:30pm, and include history, science, writing, Spanish, physical education, and orchestra. Teachers may reward a student’s outstanding behavior with ganas, which translate into money toward their paycheck. Throughout the day, KEY students are expected to assign themselves, making proactive decisions and maintaining responsibility for their actions. Beginning at 3:30pm, students participate in hour long learning teams, where they work on extracurricular activities such as critical thinking skills, test strategies, yearbook, or student council. Teachers are also available to conference. From 4:30pm until 5pm, students return to their homerooms to begin their homework before dismissal. At home, students are expected to complete a minimum of two hours of homework each evening, in addition to thirty minutes of independent reading. Parents must sign all tests, behavior reports, and completed homework.
Extracurricular Activities

Three Saturdays a month, students attend school from 9am to 1pm, where they participate in enrichment activities. Electives include art, music, drama, writing, African dance, drum line, strategy games, test preparation, and flag football. Students are introduced to music theory and taught to play instruments with the school’s impressive orchestra. Frequently led by volunteers and community leaders, these activities expose students to a variety of mediums and interests.

Students who model excellent behavior earn enough on their paychecks to participate in day field trips and end of the year trips. Day field trips are intended to reinforce the subjects learned in school, and include visits to Washington, DC monuments, museums, and government buildings. End of the year trips provide each grade with a new opportunity to see a different part of the country. Trips must be earned by students, and always include visits to area colleges. KEY fifth graders visit Florida’s Disney World, sixth graders visit North Carolina’s Great Smokey Mountains, seventh graders travel to Boston. Eighth graders have the privilege of two travel opportunities: a winter ski trip and a spring camping trip. “All these activities are designed to inspire the KIPP DC: KEY student to want to matriculate into college and explore more of the wondrous sites in our world. These trips will
give the students a clearer understanding of the larger world around them and the opportunity to apply their learning in areas outside of their home community.”

Family Involvement

Parents and families are involved in every aspect of their child’s education at KEY. Beginning at enrollment, administrators hold parents to specific expectations, requiring a signed contract agreement. If parents violate these terms, their child is subject to suspension or expulsion. Parents must bring their child to school on time, review and sign all homework and paychecks. Families may visit the school at any time to observe their child’s progress, and are encouraged to chaperone day trips and end of the year trips.

High School Placement & KIPP to College

Upon entering KEY Academy in fifth grade, students, families, and teachers make a commitment to “climb the mountain to college.” Each grade is referred to by the year that its students will graduate from high school and matriculate into college. Entering fifth graders in the Fall of 2008 are referred to as “Class of 2016.” High school placement counselors help students to apply to charter, magnet, or

---


private college preparatory high schools. They arrange for interviews, essay editing and financial assistance as needed.

When eighth graders graduate and become KIPP: KEY alumni, they are automatically enrolled in KIPP DC’s KIPP to College program. Program staff and volunteers follow students through high school, providing tutoring, SAT preparation, college trips, mentors, and summer internships. KIPP to College offers families college counseling and financial aid assistance. As a data-driven organization, KIPP tracks student progress and college acceptance rates, with the ambitious goal of one hundred percent college attendance.

Closing the Achievement Gap

KIPP: KEY Academy students have demonstrated unsurpassed academic success on standardized test scores. Since 2004, KEY has been the highest performing middle school in Washington, DC, outperforming every DC public and charter middle school on mathematics and reading test scores. Entering its seventh year of operation, test scores reveal that KEY’s methods lead to consistently high achievement, year after year. In 2007, 60% of fifth graders were proficient in reading, and 74% were proficient in mathematics.\footnote{Note: Test scores are taken from the 2007 DC-CAS, courtesy of the Public Charter School Board’s School Performance Report, published annually each December. Proficiency percentages reflect the number of students who are either proficient or advanced in a subject.} As indicated in Table 5, this
reflects a substantial increase from 2006, when only 48% of fifth graders were proficient in math.\textsuperscript{22}

Table 5: KIPP: KEY Academy DC-CAS Performance by Grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>READING</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>MATH</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>40.48</td>
<td>44.05</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>47.62</td>
<td>41.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td>55.95</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>23.81</td>
<td>54.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>38.96</td>
<td>49.35</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>19.48</td>
<td>51.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>36.90</td>
<td>57.14</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>24.05</td>
<td>59.49</td>
<td>16.49</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>65.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>43.04</td>
<td>39.24</td>
<td>17.72</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>7.59</td>
<td>64.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8\textsuperscript{th}</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>18.84</td>
<td>47.83</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td>73.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>21.31</td>
<td>50.82</td>
<td>27.87</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>62.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


KEY’s program creates urgency for learning. By the time students complete eighth grade, nearly all of them are proficient in reading and math. In 2007, 79% were proficient in reading. 100% were proficient in math, reflecting a 12% increase from 2006. KEY’s outstanding scores speak for themselves. Average attendance at KEY is 95%, with an annual reenrollment rate of 88%.\textsuperscript{23} KEY Academy has made AYP in Reading, Math, and Attendance every year since 2004.

In October 2007, KEY Academy was named a Blue Ribbon School by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings. “The No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools award, one of the most prestigious education awards in the country, distinguishes and honors schools for helping students achieve at very high levels and

\textsuperscript{22} Note: 48% math proficiency meets the national AYP standards. In 2006, 51% of fifth graders were proficient in reading.

\textsuperscript{23} Note: Reenrollment rate for Fall 2006.
for making significant progress in closing the achievement gap.”²⁴ In 2007, KEY was also named a Distinguished Title I School. Its teachers have won numerous awards, and 95% of graduating eighth graders attend prestigious high schools.

THE SCHOOL FOR EDUCATIONAL EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

Introduction

SEED, or School for Educational Evolution and Development, is the nation’s first urban public boarding school. It is a high performing, college preparatory boarding school educating underserved inner city children in Southeast Washington. Opened in 1998, it currently serves 320 students in grades seven through twelve, 99 percent of whom are African American. Three quarters of the student population qualify as low-income. “Ninety seven percent of SEED graduates have been accepted to college and 85 percent of alumni are on track to graduate from college.” Its mission, “to provide an outstanding, intensive educational program that prepares children, both academically and socially, for success in college” connects directly with the goal of 100% college acceptances for its students.

History

The SEED Foundation, a national non-profit organization, was created in 1997 to establish college preparatory urban public boarding schools to prepare students from underserved communities for success in college and professional life. During its first year, the foundation successfully lobbied Capital Hill to provide

---

funding for Washington, DC boarding charter schools, simultaneously obtaining a charter from the District of Columbia Public School Board.

In the fall of 1998, the SEED Public Charter School opened its doors to forty seventh graders. It operated on a $500,000 gift and was housed temporarily in the National Children’s Museum. By 2000, the SEED Foundation had secured a long-term lease on a former DCPS school building in southeast Washington. After raising close to twelve million dollars in donations and bank loans, SEED broke ground at its future campus.

By 2002, the student body had grown to 230 students with the addition of tenth and eleventh grade classes. Its success as an urban boarding school was gathering national attention, yielding nearly $600,000 in donations from Oprah’s Angel Network. By the following year, the construction of SEED’s new campus was complete. It now housed an academic building, two dormitories, and a student center. The school also reached its capacity of 320 students in grades seven through twelve.

In 2004, the SEED School of Washington graduated its first senior class. One hundred percent of these students were admitted to college. In 2005, 2006, and 2007, SEED continued to see nearly one hundred percent of its high school graduates admitted to college.26 With consistently high test scores, SEED has been named a top performing charter school by DC’s State Education Office. After nearly a decade, the

26 Note: In 2006, 96% of SEED’s senior class graduated, and 91% were accepted into a four year college. In 2005 and 2007, 100% were accepted to college. Source: The SEED Foundation, “History of the SEED Foundation,” http://www.seedfoundation.com/about_seed/history.aspx (accessed June 1, 2008).
SEED Foundation is beginning the next chapter in its history. In the fall of 2008, it will open the doors to its second campus in Baltimore, MD. Plans are underway for additional campuses in New Jersey, Ohio, and Wisconsin.

**School Design and Academic Program**

SEED offers its students a one-of-a-kind experience as the only charter boarding school in the country. Its academic program combines a rigorous college preparatory curriculum with a structured life skills development program. Students enter the SEED School in seventh grade, committing to six years of rigorous boarding school life. As a public charter school, SEED may not select its students. Instead, it must hold an annual lottery of all eligible applicants, selecting the incoming class at random. To be eligible, an applicant must be a Washington, D.C. resident entering the seventh grade, and no older than 13 years and seven months at enrollment. A complete preliminary application must be submitted to be considered.

**Academics**

As a combined middle and high school model, SEED places an enormous amount of emphasis on preparing students for college. Classes are small, permitting teachers to teach to individual student needs. The core subjects of English, mathematics, social studies, and science are taught, along with electives in art, languages, physical education, and technology. Seventh grade students frequently enter the school two to three years below grade level, having attending multiple
schools prior to SEED. To catch these students up, the middle school\textsuperscript{27} academic program focuses on core subjects, and is comprised of double blocks of reading and mathematics, tutoring, and subject-specific study halls. This program’s standards are known as the “Gate” and are unique to SEED. Before entering into ninth grade, middle school students are required to pass a “gateway” exam. If they do not pass, they participate in a “growth year” which will prepare them for the rigorous college preparatory curriculum employed in the high school grades. SEED does not believe in grade advancement based on age or time, but instead requires that students meet a specific grade’s benchmarks before advancing to the next level.

The curriculum is based on “power standards” that explain in detail what students need to master in each subject and grade level. It also provides assessment measures to ensure mastery. All components of the program are data driven, from the instruction to the assessment.

As a requirement of the college preparatory and liberal arts curriculum, students select arts electives such as studio art or drama. Each year, students produce and act in a musical. Working with community partners such as the Wooly Mammoth Theater Company, students are afforded tickets to local performances of theater, music, and dance.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Note}: Middle school is comprised of seventh and eighth grades; high school is comprised of ninth through twelfth grades.
Character Building

Outside of class, the student life staff provides ample programs and structured time where learning continues. The foundation of SEED’s extracurricular life is a program known as *Habitats for Achieving Life-Long Success* (HALLS). During the daily, hour long sessions, students learn life skills not often taught at home. Topics include etiquette, budgeting, time management, grooming, conflict resolution, and other skills intended to prepare them for college life. SEED administrators are constantly reinforcing these skills, which are built around five core values: respect, responsibility, self-discipline, compassion, and integrity. The school uses a paycheck system to monitor student behavior and to reward students who embody the core values.

Teachers and administrators are the heart of the institution, doing everything possible to ensure students achieve. Co-founder Rajiv Vinnakota explains, “the most important thing is that they act as role models for all of our students. By walking with our students literally 24 hrs a day, hopefully our students will learn and say I can do this [go to college] and I want to do this.”

Students are expected to succeed, and there is no question of this from the moment they walk onto campus. Entering seventh grade students are honored for their decision to attend SEED. Attending the boarding school for six years requires
determination and commitment. It is not for the faint at heart. SEED students “are united by the desire to excel in middle and high school and graduate from college.”

Campus Design

The boarding school model allows SEED to support its students 24 hours a day during the school week. Students arrive at school on Sunday evening, and return home to their families on Friday afternoon. They live in clusters of twelve to fifteen students that are named for a college or university. Within these “houses,” students share the same meal times, study halls, and field trips. They develop close relationships with their housemates and the “house parents,” who are constant positive role models. The four acre campus is designed to encourage community interaction, with four multipurpose buildings. The Academic Center houses classrooms, labs, offices, health center, technology center, and a library. The Student Center contains the admissions office, parent resource center, dining hall, gym and school store. Two dormitories each house 154 students and eighteen boarding faculty members, with amply study rooms and kitchens. This extensive, self-sufficient, successful educational facility lies east of the Anacostia River, in the most underserved district of Washington, DC.

A central focus of the SEED academic program is the school’s library. Because most students enter the school several grade levels behind, reading is

---

constantly emphasized. Daily independent reading, class reading goals, and book clubs are all part of school culture. In middle school, students are familiarized with library resources and processes, such as conducting topical research and checking out books. The use of technology and online periodicals is stressed, and the library is available to students both at lunch and after school. The library serves as a haven for students to study and to learn.

Discipline

Upon enrollment in seventh grade, the SEED Program is clearly communicated to parents and students. Both parties must adhere to the college preparatory boarding school model employed by the school, including the academic standards for achievement. Parents must agree to a high level of school involvement, beginning with the responsibility of picking up and dropping off their children and supporting them during weekends at home. Students are taught the school’s core values and expectations, and this is reinforced with a school-wide discipline policy in effect 24 hours a day. If a student repeatedly fails to behave, the school reserves the right to expel the student.

Summer Experience

For SEED students, learning continues throughout the summer. Opportunities with SEED partners abound, as students engage in academic and experiential programs through the country and world. “In recent years, students have taken part in
creative writing camps at the Putney School for the Arts in Vermont, traveled to Greece through the Niarchos Foundation Greek Classics Program, lived in Mexico and Spain through Experiments in International Living and camped in Wyoming through the City Kids Wilderness Project."29 These opportunities offer exposure to new challenges and cultures, expanding a student’s perspective and sharpening their intellect. They also provide a platform for activities and experiences that a student will recount during the college admissions process.

**Beyond the Classroom**

**A Day in the Life**

School life at SEED is different from a regular public school because it does not begin at 8am and end at 3pm. Rather, it is in constant motion, from the moment students wake up in the morning to the moment that they fall asleep at night. Because students live at SEED 24 hours a day, five days a week, the school is able to create a dynamic community of adult role models to support students constantly. Students view the administrators and teachers as “friends” because these adults are deeply committed to their success. If a student is struggling, they go the extra mile to provide time and attention. No other school model has the ability to offer students such personalized and constant support.

---

A Day in the Life of a SEED student begins at 6:30am, when students awaken in their dorm rooms, don their required uniforms, and head to the dining room for breakfast. After three morning classes, students enjoy a hot buffet lunch. Four afternoon classes follow, including a daily “life skills” course for the middle school students. After the school day ends, SEED students participate in a variety of extracurricular activities, athletics and field trips, intended to provide structure and a constant sense of community and support. Clubs are often student-run, and include journalism, dance, yearbook, chess and videography. Dinner is served in the dining hall at 5:30pm. Afterwards, students participate in a mandatory study hall beginning at 7pm. Students may work in their rooms or common study rooms during this time, which is supervised by school staff that are available to answer homework questions. By 9pm, students are required to be in their rooms for an hour of reading before bedtime at 10pm.

Athletics

To support SEED’s mission of developing independent, motivated, and socially adept students, physical education plays a key role in daily life. As a component of the HALLS Program, students are taught life schools, including the value of exercise and healthy living. This is reinforced with the plethora of sports available to students, including baseball, cheerleading, flag football, golf, soccer, softball, tennis, track, and volleyball. Beyond regular physical education classes, students participate in intramural and competitive sports. Athletics at SEED
“encourage students to challenge themselves, both physically and mentally, and teach the values of sportsmanship, teamwork, and commitment.” Every aspect of SEED life promotes students with strong character, work ethic, and leadership.

Family and Community

Families are integrated into the SEED community from day one. The school’s founders believe that this partnership and joint commitment must be achieved in order for a student to be successful. School visits are emphasized from the start, as parents must go to the campus to submit an admissions application. Once students enroll, parents are encouraged to visit as often as possible. Opportunities to volunteer and to attend events with their children cultivate strong relationships and support networks. Parents receive regular communication from teachers on their child’s academic progress and behavior, and are encouraged to play a role in student learning.

SEED is not a “true” boarding school where students are sent to live away from home. At SEED, “we specifically put the school in the city where the children come from, so that they will be close to their family. We want to strengthen families; we want families involved in raising of their children…as they grow into adults they will remain close to their family,” describes Alder. Without a family and community partnership, SEED’s founders feel its students would not be as successful. Local heroes and community leaders often visit the school to speak to students, expanding

their knowledge of career options. SEED involves students in local service projects such as park clean-ups, teaching them to give back to their own communities.

“Students are encouraged and inspired to regard themselves as citizens of not only their school, but also the local and global community.”31

College Counseling

While the goal of college attendance is clear to entering students, most will be the first in their family to attend college. Co-founder Eric Adler explains, “We are literally presenting families the opportunity to have a first generation college graduate.” Therefore, SEED provides families with extensive college counseling services to assist with the process from start to finish. Counselors meet with families to prepare them for the application process, outlining expectations for applications, test scores, and college essays. Once families understand the process, they provide more support for their child. The counselors offer information on college programs, financial aid, and scholarships.

In the spring of a student’s junior year, SEED embarks on a college tour where students are exposed to a variety of college campuses. This aids students in determining which college will be their best fit, both academically and socially. Counselors support students at every step of the application process, from ensuring

students have applied to a sufficient number of schools to assisting them in making a final college acceptance decision.

**Closing the Achievement Gap**

In its tenth of operation during the 2007-2008 school year, SEED’s students demonstrate continued success as one hundred percent graduate and are accepted into college. Annual test scores reveal that students become more proficient each year they attend SEED. Test scores also reveal an overall increase in proficiency since 2006. As indicated in Table 6, 38% of seventh graders were proficient in mathematics, an increase from 31% proficient in 2006. In reading, 50% of seventh graders were proficient, a slight increase from 48% in 2006.

Table 6: The SEED Public Charter School DC-CAS Performance by Grade (Percent represented in each category)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>READING</th>
<th></th>
<th>MATH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>10.16</td>
<td>42.19</td>
<td>42.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>44.00</td>
<td>46.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>1.47</td>
<td>47.06</td>
<td>44.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>40.74</td>
<td>51.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>46.15</td>
<td>38.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As students are promoted to a higher grade, proficiency increases, unlike the trend seen in District of Columbia Public Schools. Fifty-six percent of eighth graders were proficient in mathematics and 58% were proficient in reading, representing a

---

32 *Note:* Test scores are taken from the 2007 DC-CAS, courtesy of the Public Charter School Board’s School Performance Report, published annually each December.
significant increase from the performance of seventh grade students. In tenth grade, 57% of students are proficient in mathematics, and an impressive 72% are proficient in reading. On the 2007 DC-CAS, 86% of SEED students improved their reading scores and 91% improved their math scores. The SEED School consistently made AYP in reading, mathematics and attendance each year from 2004 through 2007.\textsuperscript{33} Average attendance at SEED is 92% and the annual reenrollment rate is 75%\textsuperscript{34}.

SEED students, teachers, and parents are progressing towards the goal of college with a rigorous academic program in a highly structured environment. Test scores and student anecdotes both speak to this success, which provides a solid base of learning for children who would otherwise be left behind.

\textsuperscript{33} Note: In 2006, SEED did not meet the overall mathematics proficiency target of 40.55%. Only 37.33\% of students were proficient. In 2007, the school surpassed this target by reaching a math proficiency level of 45.33\%. SEED successfully met all other AYP targets for the past four years.

\textsuperscript{34} Note: Enrollment rate for Fall 2006.
CHAPTER 4
VALUES OF SUCCESSFUL CHARTER SCHOOLS

The school models of the highest performing Washington, DC charter middle schools are not mirror images of one another. One stands alone as a middle school, another combines an elementary and middle school model, and one is the first public boarding school in the country. Despite these variations, commonalities do exist.

By identifying the similar attributes and values, common trends can be determined across the three charter schools. Some have a positive impact, while others may have a negative impact. A study done by the National Center for Education Statistics identified the key attributes associated with achievement in schools. Skilled teachers, strong curriculum, school leadership, and discipline are indicators of student success.\(^1\) Having completed a descriptive analysis to identify those characteristics in the model charter schools, the inferential analysis that follows will place them into a values framework.

Accountability

Accountability for performance is a common thread in the daily routines of the model charter schools. Accountability, a tenant of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), is an attempt to correct the lack of transparency on many levels within the nation’s

public education system. This requirement brings greater transparency and fairness to all schools, and is important because it provides a means to measure progress.

Students are tested at the beginning of the school year, to allow for teachers to differentiate their lessons based on student ability. Benchmarks are set according to state standards and individual student proficiencies, becoming transparent measures of student achievement. Interim assessments throughout the school year determine what progress still must be made. “One of the most frequently cited attributes of schools with high levels of student learning and consistent positive student growth is that schools emphasize a challenging and appropriate curriculum.”2 Both KEY and SEED developed their own set of curriculum standards which are higher than those required by DCPS. At SEED, students are required to pass a specialized test called “The Bench” in order to graduate from eighth grade and to begin high school. Teachers are held accountable to teach specific curriculum and standards. If students require specific learning accommodations, these are made available and the students are tested accordingly.

Accountability is not only applicable to the academic expectations of each school. Accountability also directs the social and physical interactions of the students. “Combined with other strong attributes of schools, teachers, and classrooms, a disciplined climate may be a necessary precondition that permits and

---

perhaps enables good teaching and learning.”³ In the model charter schools, students are held to a high standard of behavior and character. This is spelled out for students with the infusion of their “core values” into everyday life. KIPP makes consequences clear from the moment a student enters fifth grade, requiring both students and parents to sign a non-negotiable expectations contract and a commitment to excellence. Friendship provides students and parents with a detailed list of behaviors and potential consequences, available in the parent/student handbook. Each school responds quickly and consistently to behaviors that do not meet expectations. The parents are constantly involved and expected to participate in the behavior and academic success of their children through constant emails, phone calls, and progress reports. In the event of a disciplinary issue, parent presence is required to follow through with all issues. This culture of constant accountability creates and environment where students are held to high standards by their teachers, administrators, and parents. “Teaching in high-performance schools apparently takes place in a more disciplined atmosphere requiring less effort by teachers to maintain order.”⁴ This observation is the result of the many systems and structures in place to hold students, teachers, and administrators accountable to one another.

³ Ibid., 43.
⁴ Ibid., 43.
Achievement & Competition

Achievement is a central value of these charter schools. It represents the idea of “American Exceptionalism”, where achievement yields to getting ahead in life. The basis for “American Exceptionalism” is derived from the idea that the United States and its citizens differ from other nations because its people are united by common values, including democracy, fair play, and human rights. It is represented by the drive of American citizens who work continuously to accomplish the American dream. Those who believe in this ideal value the hopes and dreams of our founding fathers and desire to achieve a more perfect America.

Proving the idea of “American Exceptionalism,” U.S. public education was a model for the world for many decades. Today, numerous studies clearly identify us as behind, lacking in educating our students. In the three model charters, American exceptionalism is manifested as achievement and competition, which are foundations for success. Each school is built upon the goal of student achievement. Strategies for achievement are analyzed constantly, as the schools use every approach to bring students to success. Students spend a longer day and part of the summer in classes, yielding a longer school year, resulting in many more hours of learning. “One of the most frequently cited attributes of schools with high levels of student learning and consistent student growth is that the schools emphasize a challenging and appropriate curriculum.”

Teachers are ambitious and dedicated, spending long hours planning

5 Ibid., 44.
and teaching. They scaffold curriculum and standards to ensure their teaching reaches every learner. At each of the model schools, content is taught, tested, re-taught and retested; the cycle repeats until the students know the material. Schools take the time and energy required to reach even the most compromised learners. Teachers are ensured the resources that are needed to assist with comprehension and fluency.

Perhaps most importantly, success is always a celebration. The small victories, such as learning how to divide fractions, are celebrated as much as the big victories. Teachers and administrators hold students to high standards, constantly praising and rewarding excellence. They involve students in the learning process, teaching the value of their learning. Students recognize that achieving success at this level opens doors for high school and college. Parents emphasize the skills taught by monitoring homework and academic progress. Every single member of the school team is engaged in the common mission of student achievement, making it a daily priority.

This emphasis on achievement leads to constant competition amongst students. As excellent grades and assessment scores are celebrated, students are motivated to work harder to achieve similar success. However, too much competition can create a stressful environment in which students and teachers easily burn out. Students become frustrated when they repeatedly do not live up to the expectations, and may shut down completely. While students must work hard to succeed in school,
life balance is essential. Teachers must support all learners, including those who are not motivated by increased competition. School leaders must be aware of this and work to minimize overly competitive school environments.

**Autonomy**

Charter school status ensures autonomy. Having autonomy is more likely to bring about great efficiency and effectiveness. In contrast to the bureaucratic approach, the intent was to allow charter schools to divest themselves from central office powers that are considered to impede change. D.C. charters are free from the bureaucracy of the DCPS Chancellor and Central Office control. In their founding charters, the three model schools designed every aspect of the operations, from school location to curriculum. Each school makes its own hiring and firing decisions, allowing for the flexibility of creating new positions or making staff changes when needed. School leaders are entirely responsible for their budgets. No ear marking or red tape prevents them from allocating funds as they see fit. Friendship Woodridge finances technology in all of its classrooms, while SEED supports its boarding students with both public and private funds. Discipline is enforced and noncompliant students serve the necessary consequences. KIPP KEY uses the “bench” analogy, physically separating students from the team when they are being disciplined, but still requiring completed class work. This level of autonomy in decision making yields greater accountability to chartering authorities. However, schools have the flexibility
to change their programs to better serve the needs of their student populations without approval of a higher governing body.

Community

The establishment of community is central to the success of each model charter school. “Teachers working together as a community of adults with individual and joint commitments to a set of common goals within the broader context of the school can have a powerful effect beyond their individual contributions.” Friendship, KIPP, and SEED are each strategically located in the community of the students they serve, allowing easy access to an excellent education. Local community leaders and citizens interact with school administrators on a regular basis, ensuring that the school’s mission complements the community’s growth. At SEED, KEY, and Friendship, partnerships with local businesses expose students to a diverse array of extracurricular activities. Community leaders visit the charters, speaking to students about their potential to achieve their dreams. Students take field trips and participate in summer programs sponsored by community organizations. They have greater access to world issues through clubs and organizations. These collaborations engage students in activities they never would have otherwise been exposed to, providing experiential learning and expanding their intellectual curiosity.

Because of their proximity to schools, many parents are actively involved in their child’s education, volunteering their time and supporting the school’s mission.

---

6 Ibid., 41.
Parental involvement has been well substantiated as key to student achievement. Parent councils are formed, increasingly the visibility and influence of families. School administrators balance the interests of families and the community with the growth and achievement of their schools. Increased parental involvement results in a greater investment in their child’s academic success and future.

Strong community also plays a role in building camaraderie and loyalty to a school. The three model charters infuse mottos, slogans, and school colors into everyday life, building school spirit. KIPP’s “Work Hard, Be Nice” is visible on school walls, letterhead, and uniform shirts. Teachers and administrators remind students regularly of the school mottos, threading character building into academic life. Students are explicitly taught how to act in class and in professional settings. Both individual and school-wide successes are celebrated daily. Students are held accountable to high academic and behavior standards through consistent consequences.

Transparent values instruction and character education reflects the schools’ high expectations and increases student loyalty. Students are taught to take responsibility for their own actions, always remembering that they are ambassadors for their school. “Students are the primary beneficiaries when a school community is cohesively focused and vigorously working toward common goals, but teachers also benefit. Teachers derive personal energy…sustain quality performance, refresh their energy to by fully engaged with students, and stay focused on the central tasks
Faculty and students alike feel a sense of belonging to and respect for their school community. A strong community builds a positive culture, ensuring students feel satisfied and challenged.

While having strong external and internal community ties helps ensure quality schools, the influence can pose a challenge for charters when the community leaders disapprove of a charter school initiative. School leaders must exercise care when making decisions that will impact the local community. Ideally, local leaders are included in discussions so that both parties may represent their individual concerns. Administrators must keep open the line of communication while carefully protecting their own interests of student success.

**Leadership and Teamwork**

Schools need a competent individual or group of individuals who can provide directions, guidance, and support in the school’s journey toward achieving its goals. Leadership provides a unifying focus, the impetus to work toward goals, and a locus for decision making along the way. In quality schools, an individual or group of individuals takes responsibility to provide school leadership, assemble a faculty with the skills to achieve school goals, provide direct support for those teachers, and make teaching and learning a main preoccupation around which everything else revolves. A school without a leader is a collection of independent classrooms with individual goals and unconnected beliefs about what is important and how to achieve it.\(^7\)

The leaders of the model charters have school visions centered on student learning and achievement. Their experience as former educators, school leaders, or

\(^7\) Ibid., 41.

graduates of urban education programs has prepared them for the challenges of serving low-income urban populations. The autonomous nature of charter schools transfers to the leadership style embodied by these charter school administrators. Strong school leaders ensure that order is maintained through efficient daily routines, transparent rules, and consistent discipline. “Principals delegate authority, develop collaborative decision-making processes, and step back from the central problem solver.” School facilities or community issues that arise are quickly resolved. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, and the faculty is held accountable to longer hours and high expectations, just like their students. If expectations are not met, school leaders can make transparent decisions about hiring and firing without the bureaucratic red tape of a central school office. A “no excuses” attitude is apparent. The entire team works tirelessly to perfect every area of their school.

“Leaders in schools with high achievement ‘worked effectively to stimulate professional discussion and to create the networks of conversation that tied faculty together around common issues of instruction and teaching’.” With this strong leadership comes a clear sense of teamwork amongst Friendship, KIPP, and SEED faculty. A shared vision and mission exists amongst school staff, with goals revisited and clarified regularly. Every person impacts the success of the school, and consistent collaboration is expected. Grade levels and departments meet regularly to

---

9 Ibid., 39.
10 Ibid.
address student progress and needs. Teachers meet regularly with special education coordinators, counselors, and parents to address student interventions. Unique to charter schools, teachers are frequently involved in decision making for the school, ensuring that all members of a school team support change.

Clear, experienced leadership combined with educated, hard-working teachers creates a high structured, orderly school for students. Students are involved in the process of their academic growth, as both students and teachers are held accountable. In the end, this leads to more significant annual growth for students who are typically several years below grade level. It is with this type of commitment that the model charter schools yield significant increases in student proficiency.

**Equality of opportunity**

Equality of opportunity is a traditional value that American citizens continually emphasize. “Despite the affluence affect and other agents of change, many of America’s most important traditional values have remained firm and constant.”¹¹ According to values theorist David Yankelovich, equality of opportunity is defined as “the practical expression on freedom and individualism in the marketplace, which helps to resolve the tensions between the values of freedom and

---

equality.\textsuperscript{12} Equality of opportunity is seen as an unchanging American value, and no place is this more evident in successful urban charter schools.

The highest performing DC charter schools are propelled by the belief that all children can learn and achieve. Students enrolling at these schools are expected to attend top performing magnet and independent high schools, and go on to college. This expectation is made clear through transparent academic expectations, as well as subtle references to college graduation year and exposure to college life. School leaders and teachers discuss educational opportunities with their students regularly, empowering their students to work hard for their own success. Students are constantly reminded that their actions, both positive and negative, will drive their future.

Visits to area high schools and colleges motivate students to work diligently for their future education. School administrators provide students with high school counseling services, directing families through the arduous application and financial aid process. Charter schools follow their alumni, tracking students through their journey to college, offering ample support and encouragement along the way. Through this system of support and expectation, students gain a better self-understanding and increased confidence in their dreams.

For each of these schools to be as successful as the scores dictate, these values resonate within all three of the charter school models. The ongoing challenge is

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
determining which threads have the greatest impact on student achievement and school quality. The analysis that follows provides a discussion of the specific values and factors that have the most potential to be infused in DC public schools across the city.
CHAPTER 5

CHARTER SCHOOLS: AN IMPETUS FOR CHANGE?

Consistent Trends in Successful Charter School Models

In the past decade, the Washington, DC public school system witnessed a severe depletion in its student population. Students flooded to newly founded charter schools or private schools, leaving public school buildings under populated or vacant. This has resulted in multiple school closings in an effort to reallocate essential resources such as school utilities, nurses, and libraries. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) proficiency levels are shamefully low\(^1\), and high school graduation rates are dismal, representing less than a third of the students who enroll in ninth grade.

At the same time, many Washington charter schools in their fifth or sixth year of inception are experiencing measurable success serving inner city students. Proficiency levels and test scores are increasing annually and high school graduation rates are soaring. The educational divide is decreasing as more urban, low-income students have access to college. The success of these students is due to the strategic management of charter leaders to create a particular school model. This model is defined most consistently by three core principles: longer school days, goal and

\(^1\) Note: Based on assessment data from DCPS and NAEP
assessm ent based instruction, and character education. These directives help ensure a realization of two key American values: equal opportunity regardless of class and individual achievement.

More Hours in School

In the early years of the charter-school movement, every school was an island, trying out its own mad or brilliant educational theory. But as charter-school proponents have studied the successes and learned from the mistakes of their predecessors, patterns, even a consensus, have begun to emerge. The schools that are achieving the most impressive results with poor and minority students tend to follow three practices. First, they require many more hours of class time than a typical public school.

This trend is true in the case study schools, which are dedicated to providing students with more hours in the classroom than the average student receives. In order to increase proficiency levels to the national average, students must progress one and a half to two grade levels within each year. A longer school day is essential for this progress. At Friendship Woodridge, students have an eight-hour school day, with many staying two to three hours into the evening for enrichment or tutoring activities. KIPP students are in school for nine hours each weekday, along with three Saturdays a month. They are also in school during the summer. As a boarding school, SEED students are immersed in an academic environment each week from Sunday evening until Friday night, 24 hours a day. Learning time cannot be overemphasized in these

2 Note: Trends as indicated in “What it takes to make a student.”

schools. During this additional learning time, reading and math instruction are emphasized as areas where students need the most growth.

**Goal Based Instruction**

Second, they treat classroom instruction and lesson planning as much as a science as an art. Explicit goals are set for each year, month and day of each class, and principals have considerable authority to redirect and even remove teachers who aren't meeting those goals. The schools' leaders believe in frequent testing, which, they say, lets them measure what is working and what isn't, and they use test results to make adjustments to the curriculum as they go. Teachers are trained and retrained, frequently observed and assessed by their principals and superintendents. There is an emphasis on results but also on "team building" and cooperation and creativity, and the schools seem, to an outsider at least, like genuinely rewarding places to work, despite the long hours.  

The three model charter schools place achievement and accountability at the forefront of their school missions. Instruction is constantly refined to meet academic goals. SEED, KIPP, and Friendship administer interim assessments quarterly, modeling them after statewide tests to familiarize students. The entire school team evaluates interim scores, and benchmark goals are set for the school year. SEED requires an additional “gateway” exam for students to be accepted into ninth grade. While assessments are frequent and varied in form, it is important to point out that teachers do not teach specifically to the statewide test. Rather, they teach students

---

the appropriate grade level curriculum, with a strategic focus on the skills where students are lacking.

Curricula are designed with proficiency goals in mind, and a scaffold of skills is created to appropriately ‘catch-up’ the lowest students. Special education services along with reading and math interventions are standard practice. Teachers are highly qualified and highly trained on instructional techniques. They are evaluated regularly and are constantly perfecting their craft. Student achievement is the focus of the majority of the schools’ resources as administrators evaluate the potential of every student in attendance.

Character Education

Third, they make a conscious effort to guide the behavior, and even the values, of their students by teaching what they call character. Using slogans, motivational posters, incentives, encouragements and punishments, the schools direct students in everything from the principles of teamwork and the importance of an optimistic outlook to the nuts and bolts of how to sit in class, where to direct their eyes when a teacher is talking and even how to nod appropriately.5

At SEED, Friendship, and KIPP, character education is successfully intertwined into daily academic learning. KIPP uses a system of lingo and slogans to remind students of daily expectations, and tracks behaviors with a paycheck system. SEED and Friendship use the language of expectation to address student behaviors.

5 Ibid.
As a boarding school, SEED teaches its students professional skills during afternoon and evening enrichment courses. Each school’s community is built around the core values of respect, achievement, and hard work. When students enter the school for the first time, they are oriented with the expectations and goals, and are constantly held accountable to them. Teachers take time during instruction to celebrate students who exemplify the school values, or to make an example out of a student who does not. A longer school day allows for more time to teach academics and character. Each of the model schools uses the goal of college as the incentive for students to act appropriately. Without the character skills and academic knowledge that they are learning, students are not prepared for a college preparatory high school or for college itself.

**Value Tensions between DCPS and DC Charters**

With the success of the model charters, consideration is given to whether similar models could be employed in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). The public education system in Washington exists as a separate entity from the charter school network. Years of low performance, neglected facilities, and unsafe school environments have led to a dysfunctional system in need of drastic reorganization. The current school superintendent, Michelle Rhee, has begun the rebuilding process. Her vision should incorporate specific reforms including a longer school day, goal based instruction, and character education programs. Successful DC
charter schools can be utilized as resources to adopt these reforms. However, preexisting tensions between public and charter schools make it difficult to realize such potential.

One of the most prominent tensions between charters and DCPS is the issue of choice. The ability for a parent to choose a school, or a principal to choose its staff, offers schools freedom from bureaucratic control. Freedom of choice creates independent leaders, and allows seamless improvements to the school environment. This type of freedom does not harm the school community, but rather promotes student achievement. Parents can visit any number of charters and select to enroll their children at the schools. Teachers and administrators have leadership roles, negotiating power, and flexibility with salaries. They are held accountable to student performance and often are not tenured, so their decision to work at a charter school is a result of a true desire to be there. Public schools in Washington are viewed as a last resort option among many parents, after considering private, parochial, and charter schools for their children. Students are designated to neighborhood public schools, and unless the school is underperforming, they must attend that location. Administrators, teachers, and students recognize their lack of choice and view their school as desolate. New reforms are difficult to initiate, because public school communities are not receptive. Additionally, the government bureaucracy required to tackle such reforms yields another level of discouragement.
The autonomy enjoyed by DC charter schools offers complete freedom from the bureaucracy of the school superintendent’s office. Charters are free to use their funding, buildings, and resources as they see best fit. Administrators hire and fire teachers at will, and students are disciplined according to their behavior. With this level of autonomy comes a considerable amount of accountability. However, flexibility still exists and changes can be made if something is not working. The autonomous nature of DC charter schools reflects the American value of independence. To be successful, one must be allowed the independence to grow and to thrive.

Unfortunately, this is not the case in DCPS. Public schools face enormous barriers when attempting to allocate and spend funding. “Public discussions about DCPS spending include a wide-ranging array, often conflicting, of per pupil figures and assertions based on them. Such confusion arises because the definitions and assumptions used in calculating per pupil spending vary widely, are usually unstated, and are sometimes applied inconsistently.”6 Additional confusion arises when schools attempt to allocate resources in new ways. Approval must be granted by the superintendent’s office, a time consuming process. Similarly, staffing at public schools is affected by tenure and union requirements, which make it difficult to fire

---

underperforming teachers. This prevalent tension between charters and public schools adds to the difficulty of imposing a charter school model in DCPS.

Another tension is the freedom to make key decisions, specifically around leadership. Individual DC public schools lack the ability to self-select dedicated, energetic leaders to run their schools. Rather, principals and other administrators are appointed by the superintendent’s office with little or no say from the school community. This lack of freedom hinders the ability of school leaders to make necessary changes to improve student achievement. These schools leaders may have little understanding of the complexity of their new school site, and often receive minimal orientation to the school community. In many ways, leading a DCPS school is a “sink or swim” experience as principals are expected to make extraordinary changes with little support.

Charter schools, on the other hand, have the freedom to select leaders who share the school’s vision. The schools set the experience requirements and terms of employment. As smaller organizations, it is easier to ensure that both administrators and faculty work towards a common mission. Many charters have a specific academic focus for their students, and a shared vision amongst staff is essential for success. Lastly, organization charts are transparent and fluid. If a charter decides that its funds are better spent on a reading specialist rather than a vice principal, this decision is made and articulated to the school community.
What can charter schools do to help DCPS?

Public schools face a considerable number of challenges beyond the tensions described. However, charter schools face their own set of challenges such as facilities acquisition, political opposition, and consistency in quality leadership. Despite these and other challenges, charters are thriving. With the common mission of giving all children an excellent education, charter schools should collaborate with DCPS to improve the overall educational experience in Washington.

Charter schools will continue to yield high student achievement if they persevere in the midst of the changing DC school climate. They should continue analyzing their instruction, approaches, and curricula. Refining their character education, special education, and discipline programs will ensure students receive the best possible services. Charters should hire the brightest to teach in their schools, while offering performance based pay. They should continue to identify and to define their best practices, and student proficiency numbers will speak for themselves.

As DCPS school leaders warm to the idea that charter schools will not only thrive, but also will continue to grow exponentially in Washington, charters should share their best practices with traditional public schools. Interim student assessment analysis should be communicated, as the data are used to set measurable goals that drive instruction. School observations should be arranged as professional development for teachers. Student data and curriculum should be shared as tools for

---

improvement. With time, DCPS leaders may commit to a longer school day to bring students up to grade level. They also may see the need for collaboration amongst teachers, both inside and outside the classroom, along with increased teacher training and performance-based compensation. These initiatives will ensure students the best education possible, affording them hope and opportunity for their future.
CONCLUSION

High achieving charter schools provide good examples of how to bring about the systemic change needed to ensure quality education for all students. Given the increasing achievement gap between poor minority students and their suburban counterparts, American public schools must reform to ensure quality education for all students. Whether this happens through the charter school model or through other means, it is critical that a very aggressive overturning of public schools occurs.

We must return to the days when the American public education system was a model for the world. “For most of the 20th century, America prospered at the same time that the gap between the rich and poor diminished.”1 Up until 1970’s, public schools were models for other countries. “The United States — with help from President Franklin Roosevelt — pushed for mass education at the college level, and by 1970, half of American students were attending a university, at least briefly. We were far ahead of the rest of the world. Then in the 1970s, the United States education system began to stagnate, with high-school graduation rates stuck at about three-quarters of all students. Probably as a result, income inequality increased again.”2 A Nation at Risk, published in 1983, highlighted these increasing disparities in education, prompting systemic change. Since then, the small steps taken by

---


2 Ibid.
education leaders and policy makers have not significantly impacted our national education system. Today, many countries have surpassed the U.S. in educational standards and progress.

“The United States is the only country in the industrialized world where children are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents were, according to a new study by the Education Trust, an advocacy group based in Washington.”3 Our failing education system impacts our economy, as today’s students are unprepared for tomorrow’s jobs. Nowhere is this problem more obvious than in our inner city schools, where “ ‘lots of kids are being left behind.’ ”4 If schools continue to fail our low-income students, they will only become a greater burden on the economy. If America desires to surpass other countries in terms of leadership, drastic change must occur. The amount of educational progress we make in the next decade will speak to how much we can maintain our global leadership. Our citizens have to be better economically and intellectually for us to preserve this global standing and to be equal or better economically.

The successful charter school models described provide one method of ensuring educational equality for low-income students. This analysis provides specific tactics for success, while acknowledging the difficulty involved in building high achieving charters. Regardless of the reforms chosen to drive improvement of

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.
public education, change must occur for the United States to remain globally viable and to sustain democracy. The increasing gap existing across classes must be closed, as democracy cannot exist in this environment. Reforms must be implemented on a national scale to ensure high quality public schools become the rule, not the exception.
APPENDIX

Appendix 1. Breakdown of District of Columbia Charter Law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Statistics</th>
<th>2nd strongest of the nation's 41 charter laws</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Schools Allowed</strong></td>
<td>20 per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Charters Operating</strong></td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approval Process</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eligible Chartering Authorities</strong></td>
<td>DC Public Charter School Board; the DC City Council may designate an additional entity by enactment of a bill. (The DC Board of Education transferred all their authorized schools to the DCPCSB and are no longer an authorizer.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eligible Applicants</strong></td>
<td>Person, group, organization, or post-secondary institution, including public, private, or quasi-private entities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of Charter Schools</strong></td>
<td>Converted public, converted private, new starts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appeals Process</strong></td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schools May Be Started Without Third Party Consent</strong></td>
<td>No; 51% of teachers, 66% of parents/guardians must support for conversions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recipient of Charter</strong></td>
<td>Charter school board of trustees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Term of Initial Charter</strong></td>
<td>15 years with at least one review every 5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operations</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Automatic Waiver from Most State and District Education Laws, Regulations, and Policies</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Legal Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Governance</strong></td>
<td>Board of trustees as specified in charter; board must have an odd number of members not to exceed 7 and must include at least 2 parents of enrolled students; majority of board members must be D.C. residents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Charter School May be Managed or Operated by a For-Profit</strong></td>
<td>Charters may not be granted directly to for-profit organizations, but the schools may be managed by them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-----------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transportation for Students</strong></td>
<td>Charter school students, like regular public school students, are eligible for reduced public transportation fares.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facilities Assistance</strong></td>
<td>Preference over vacant district buildings is mandated (but not always applied). Conversion schools have a right of first offer to surplus properties under Mayor's jurisdiction. These schools must be given the right to lease or purchase surplus property 25% below the nonprofit rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Annual reports to the chartering authority and District of Columbia Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amount</strong></td>
<td>100% of operations funding follows students, based on D.C. per-pupil formula. Estimated portion is about $11,154.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Path</strong></td>
<td>Funds pass from state office to school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fiscal Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start-up Funds</strong></td>
<td>Federal funds available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Bargaining / District Work Rules</strong></td>
<td>Teachers may negotiate as separate unit with charter school governing body or work independently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Certification</strong></td>
<td>Not required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leave of Absence from District</strong></td>
<td>Up to 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Retirement Benefits</strong></td>
<td>A public charter school may establish a retirement system for employees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Eligible Students</strong></td>
<td>All D.C. students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preference for Enrollment</strong></td>
<td>Students enrolled prior, district residents, and siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrollment Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Charter school may not limit enrollment based on academic ability or achievement, but may limit enrollment based on the area of focus of the school (e.g. mathematics or the arts).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Selection Method (in case of over-enrollment)</strong></td>
<td>Lottery/random process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>At-Risk Provisions</strong></td>
<td>Chartering authorities are to give preference to schools that target students with special needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accountability</strong></td>
<td>All state district standards/assessments apply to charter schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter school must obtain accreditation from an accrediting body deemed appropriate by the chartering authority; if school includes preschool or kindergarten, it must be licensed as a child development center by the D.C. government.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Center for Education Reform. “State-by-state charter law profiles: Washington, DC.”

The SEED Foundation. “Foundation Page.”


